

GHOST TOWN BONANZA

Rosemary Taylor, the author of *Chicken Every Sunday*, now gives us a gay romantic novel set in, of all places, a ghost town!

It was unlikely enough that Ralph and Leila should ever meet. But meet they did, and with startling results. When Ralph, a suave New York actor of sorts, offered Leila, a small-town girl who wanted to be a Certified Public Accountant, a ride to the West Coast in his car, how was he to know that the very first day his car would go over a cliff and leave them stranded on a desolate mountainside? And who could possibly have guessed that they would spend that night camping out in the dilapidated saloon of a nearby ghost town called Pearl? But they are not in their new seclusion for long. What happens provides an entertaining love story between Ralph and Leila, two engaging young people, and a series of hilarious episodes which prove conclusively how lively a ghost town can be!

Rosemary Taylor has also written :

CHICKEN EVERY SUNDAY
RIDIN' THE RAINBOW
BAR NOTHING RANCH
COME CLEAN, MY LOVE

Rosemary Taylor



GHOST
TOWN
BONANZA

MACDONALD : LONDON

I

At twelve o'clock, noon Leila Page and Ralph Bayless had never met. At twelve o'clock midnight they were stretched out on an old mattress, a ragged piece of canvas covering them, sound asleep on the sagging floor of what had once been the town of Pearl's leading saloon.

Then they woke up. First Leila with a piercing scream, then Ralph because of the scream.

"Miss Page! What's the matter?"

Leila Page started to scream again and then she gasped, "Oh, it's you! For a minute I didn't know where I was."

"What did you scream for?"

"Something ran over my face."

"A rat probably."

"It was so horrible, that thing on my face."

"It might even have been a skunk," said Ralph cheerfully. "And think if he'd acted in typical skunk fashion. Our only clothes!"

"Don't talk of such a thing!" Leila lay back on the mattress. Then she said, "I wonder what time it is."

Ralph looked at his wrist watch. The glowing hands said ten minutes after twelve.

"It's a long time till morning." He twisted restlessly. "I'm cold. Aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

He snapped on his cigarette lighter. "Hold this. I'll break up some more wood and make another fire."

While she held the lighter he tore several boards from the saloon's counter and snapped them over his knee. Then he stuffed the pieces into the round pot-bellied stove. The ancient wood caught easily from the coals of their previous fire and the flames were soon leaping high, lighting up the long, narrow room where Pearl's imbibing citizens had once drunk deep.

There was not much left of the saloon. The long counter; leaning crazily, the cracked mirror above it, on which a painted lady, naked and voluptuous, eyed them lewdly, a couple of tables, the old mattress—and why should that have been there?—and one completely battered brass spittoon. At one time the saloon had boasted a canvas ceiling. Now it hung in tatters from the rafters. And Ralph had ripped down a piece of it for a covering.

The girl stretched out her hand toward the heat of the stove. "That feels good. Thank you very much," she added formally.

"Don't thank me. I like to be warm, too."

He lay down beside her. "Thank God for this mattress and the canvas; we'd have frozen without it."

"Yes," she said, "although it's very embarrassing. I mean . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Oh, stop being embarrassed," Ralph told her impatiently. "We're in a spot where we have to bundle, so okay we bundle. Do you happen to have a ham sandwich on you?"

"Why, no, I don't," she answered seriously.

"That's too bad. Because I'm certainly hungry."

"I'm hungry, too."

"That's also bad. For I think we can definitely plan on no breakfast, and no lunch. And it's a long walk back to that last town."

"I'm thirsty, too."

"After that rain there are probably plenty of puddles outside. If I had a glass or a cup I'd go out and bring you a drink. But I guess you'll have to go to the puddle. Are you *that* thirsty?"

"No, I'm not."

"This is like being on a desert island, isn't it?"

"In what way?"

"Well, we're marooned up here. Not a soul around. On a desert island, though, there'd be more to eat. Coconuts, at least, and fish. How'd you like a nice little trout, fried in butter?"

"Would there be butter on a desert island, and aren't trout fresh-water fish?"

"This island is in a fresh-water lake. And when the ship went down, it broke up, and the supplies floated in. So along with our fish we're going to have bacon and eggs and . . ."

"Wouldn't the eggs be broken?"

"One crate, Miss Page, one crate of eggs floated in unbroken."

In the stove there was a sudden fierce burning as the wood settled. The flames leaped high again, revealing the girl's shining dark hair and chiselled features. Ralph raised himself on one elbow and looked down at her, thinking: She's very pretty actually, but what a stick!

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm very sorry."

"What are you sorry about?"

"I'm sorry that I can't be bright and cheery. To me this is tragedy, not farce. A few hours ago I had a thousand dollars and a lot of clothes."

"A few hours ago I had a car, and I had a lot of clothes, too. And I need clothes more than you do."

"Why?"

"Because an actor needs clothes. You don't need them for your job."

"I can't work in that credit bureau in this muddy suit."

"Don't be so literal minded. I need being well dressed isn't important to an accounting job. You can wangle some kind of an outfit until you get your first pay cheque. But I need a whole wardrobe for a front. And an actor never knows when he'll get a job. And all I have in the world is some forty dollars in my wallet."

"You'll have the insurance on your car," she stated.

To this there was only silence and his quickly drawn breath.

"Don't tell me," she cried, "that you were driving without insurance!"

He said dully, "I let it lapse."

"How stupid!"

"Yes, even more stupid than you carrying that cash in your purse."

"I knew you were on the wrong road. I begged you to turn back. And then when you stopped, you should have put a rock behind the wheel. Even when you have the brake on, when you stop on a hill you should put a rock behind the wheel."

"What good would the rock have done? It was the whole side of the road that gave way. And since we're having post mortems, it was your idea that we leave the highway and take that short cut."

"You were driving so fast. I wanted to get you out of that traffic. I didn't know about the detour. But I knew when you took the wrong fork. I kept telling you to turn back."

"You did. And I didn't. But it could be we'll find your money."

"After that fire!"

"It may be charred, but recognizable. If it is, the treasury will reimburse you. We'll climb down the cliff and poke through what's left of the car."

"We'll only find ashes."

"Don't be such a defeatist."

"I think," she said severely, "we should stop talking and try to get to sleep. We've got a long walk ahead of us."

"Yes, ma'am," Ralph said with exaggerated meekness. He lay back and thought suddenly of the little white card in the weighing machine. He had weighed himself at the café where he'd breakfasted that morning—it seemed a thousand years ago now—and the card had popped out with the words: "193 pounds. Misfortune will come to you through a dark woman."

If he hadn't picked up the girl he'd never have left the main road for that short cut. Of course, if he hadn't stopped to see Jack he'd never have met her either. But he'd run into a garage for a lubricating job and suddenly realized he was in his friend's home town. He and Jack had known each other in New York in the days when Jack, too, thought he might be another Barrymore. But Jack had forsaken drama and gone home to manage the family drugstore.

He found Jack prosperous and complacent, married to a determinedly charming woman who insisted he stay for lunch and then as firmly insisted he do a good turn for their next-door neighbour, one Leila Page.

"She has practically no money and she's going by bus to Los Angeles. I think it would be nice if you gave her a lift in your car. She's had an awful time. An old aunt dying for ages and now she's just buried her. Leila was supposed to inherit the aunt's money, only she hasn't. She's a noble character."

Ralph hadn't the slightest desire to be accompanied by a noble character, particularly a female noble character, and visualized Leila Page as fat and middle-aged. To his surprise she turned out to be slim, young, twenty-three or -four, and rather pretty though decidedly prim. But if he'd remembered that card her dark hair and eyes should have given him pause.

So they'd started out together, he and Leila Page, and almost immediately she began to annoy him.

"Stop sign!" she said sharply, as he swung into the highway.

"I saw it, but nothing was coming either way."

"It's better to get the habit of stopping." And then a little later: "The speed limit is fifty."

"I'm only going sixty."

"Seventy-five."

"Going to make a liar of me for fifteen miles?" He felt like turning back and dumping the noble character right in the lap of Mrs. Jack. But then he thought: Three years she's been looking after a dying aunt. That's enough to make anyone edgy.

"I'm a good driver," he told her, "and this is clear road. So why don't you lean back and relax?" And he'd given her his special, you-can-trust-me-little-girl smile.

But Leila didn't smile back, she merely hunched up her shoulders still higher and leaned forward a little more.

They came to a big defence factory and were caught up in the heavy traffic of the outgoing shift. He slowed down, but the girl was still doing the driving right along with him, her foot hard pressed on an imaginary brake. He cut down his speed still further; then the cars behind him screeched angrily. And so when they came to a secondary dirt road which she said would bypass the

traffic and also the next big town, he swung off onto it. It wasn't too bad a road, but full of curves. Now he couldn't go more than thirty.

Leila leaned back at last and said, "I guess I'm awfully nervous about cars. A smash-up paralysed my aunt. And it took her all that time to die." Then she gave an unexpected laugh. "I kept thinking back there when you were going so fast that I hadn't made my will and if I was killed my money would go to a cousin who doesn't need it instead of to a friend who does. I have a thousand dollars," she told him gravely, "the first money I've ever had, I mean in a lump. My aunt gave it to me the night before she died. But it probably doesn't seem very much to you."

"A thousand dollars! In the present state of my finances I'd cut somebody's throat for a thousand dollars."

Leila's eyes had widened then and she'd looked almost afraid.

"Don't be scared. I won't cut yours. But I thought your aunt hadn't left you anything. I mean . . ."

"I didn't tell anybody about this. I didn't . . . well, I just *didn't*."

He waited for her to go on. When there was no more, he said, "If you'd like to hear about some lean times . . ." And then he told her about his five years in New York, the jobs he'd had, the jobs he'd almost had, the jobs he didn't get at all.

She had listened intently and at the end had said, "I don't think you had such a bad time. At some of the jobs you made a lot of money."

"The trouble is when I make a lot of money, I spend a lot of money."

"You ought to budget, put so much aside for a rainy day."

"I was never any good at budgeting. So now I try T.V. in Hollywood. Maybe my luck will change."

"Is it all luck, or is it . . . well, how much of it is talent?"

"That's what I ask myself sometimes. Maybe I haven't got what it takes."

"I couldn't be in anything artistic," she said. "I'd have to have a steady income, know exactly where I was at."

"What *do* you do for a steady income?"

"Well, for three years I've been an unpaid nurse. But I expected . . . well, you do think of such things . . . that my aunt would provide for me. She meant to, but she never quite got around to it. Not until the very end, and then it was too late. But she told me about the thousand dollars. She had the bills hidden in her desk, and she said I was to take them and not say anything to anybody."

Before her aunt's illness it seemed that Leila had worked in the credit office of a Los Angeles department store. If she had any ambition it was to be a Certified Public Accountant, but that would take years of study. However, with the money from her aunt she was going to take some courses in accounting.

"Figures drive me nuts," Ralph told her then. "I can't even balance a cheque book."

"But how do you know how much you have in the bank?"

"At the end of the month the bank lets me know."

"But you might be overdrawn!"

"Again, the bank lets me know. And how! But I haven't had that worry lately. I haven't *had* a bank account."

She shook her head. "I just couldn't live like that."

Around a hairpin turn they came to a road block and a big sign: "Detour."

"I didn't know about this," the girl apologized.

The detour was quite rough, and climbed sharply. It began to rain, a sudden driving storm that came at them horizontally, as if they were being sprayed by a giant hose. At the forks he studied the map and took the turn she insisted was wrong. She kept urging him to turn back. But the way he'd read the map they'd certainly find the highway just over the mountain.

It began to rain even harder; the windshield wipers were of little use. Ralph could scarcely see beyond the radiator cap and the headlights showed nothing but a dim yellowness.

They crept along, the road getting steeper, and Ralph, although he couldn't see, got the feeling they were in some sort of canyon. The girl sat, tense and miserable, peering through the windshield.

Suddenly the rain stopped. As if the giant hose had been turned in another direction. The headlights showed the road to be deeply rutted, overgrown with weeds. They were not in a canyon, but along the edge of a cliff, the mountain looming over them on one side and falling away steeply on the other.

"There aren't any tracks," the girl said. "Cars haven't been on this road for a long time."

"This rain would have washed out any tracks."

"I wish I'd taken the bus," she said ungraciously.

"You can take it as soon as we reach the highway."

"But the highway's back there."

"We'll cut into it on the other side of this mountain."

They slithered on, the back wheels sliding sickeningly in the soft mud.

Surprisingly she unlatched the door and held it slightly open.

"Don't jump! For heaven's sakes!"

"If the car starts going over, I certainly will. Oh, what's that?"

Up ahead the road was blocked by a pile of dirt and stones, a small landslide.

Ralph got out to examine it and Leila followed.

"We can get over this, all right," he told her.

"You can't! You'll have to turn around."

"But we *can't* turn around here."

"We just passed a place wide enough to turn it. You'll have to back up. I'll stay outside and guide you."

"Look," he said, and pointed. "Up there on the ridge. Houses. There's a town up there, and I think I see a light."

"Those aren't houses. Those are rocks. And I don't believe that's a light."

"They're houses and let's go to them. I'll drive the car across this and you walk."

"No!" she cried. "I won't let you." Suddenly she ran ahead of him to the car. She reached in and snatched the keys.

He started toward her. "Give me those keys!"

She backed away from him. "Not until you promise not to go on."

"Give them to me!"

"I'm saving your life." She backed still further, then tripped over a rock and sat down hard on the road. Before she could get up he caught her and twisted the keys out of her hand.

She let out a piercing shriek.

"Stop it! I didn't hurt you *that* much."

"The car!" she screamed. "The car!"

He whirled to see the headlights pointing upward. The car was sliding over the cliff! It was gone! He could hear the sickening crashes as it somersaulted down over

the rocks, the headlights flashing crazily, and then no lights at all. Next the exploding petrol tank and the leaping flames!

For a long time he stood there watching.

The girl's cold voice: "It was *your* fault. When you stop on a hill even with the brake on, you should always put a rock behind the wheel."

Rage boiled up in him. He turned with an almost uncontrollable urge to kick her. Then without answering he walked up the road toward the place where he'd seen the light. But now he couldn't see it any more. Behind him he heard the girl getting to her feet and following.

The moon broke through the clouds and up on the ridge the outline of the buildings was sharp and clear. He'd been right. There was some sort of habitation. But what kind of a place could be at the end of such a road?

He soon found out. The buildings were gutted shells, ramshackle, half fallen down. The light he had seen had been the reflection of the headlights on the broken window of an empty store. They were in a ghost town!

2

Ralph reached over and touched the girl. "Wake up, Miss Page . . . Leila!"

She turned toward him, smiling sleepily, her eyes half open.

He thought: What a beautiful smile. She's lovely when she's not all tied up in knots.

But the smile vanished as awareness came to her. She sat up and looked around wildly. Her face became pinched and anxious.

"So it wasn't a nightmare?"

"No, it happened. But do me a favour, please."

"What?" she asked warily.

"Take a deep breath.

She stared at him in wonder, but her chest rose and fell obediently.

"Is it, or *isn't* it?" he demanded.

"Coffee!" she cried in a loud voice.

"That's what I thought, but I wanted to be sure. And it's not far away. Let's find it." He got up from the mattress, pulling her with him.

The aroma of coffee was stronger in the back of the saloon. They went through a passage way and into what had been a store-room and out through the store-room's back door into a sort of courtyard. There over an open fire with a big coffee pot on it squatted a little man in faded blue denims. His back was toward them and he was breaking up kindling.

"Good morning," Ralph announced.

The little man whirled so fast his hat fell off, revealing white hair and a scraggly white beard.

"Hell, damn! Don't creep up on a body like that! If I'd hadda gun I mighta shot you!"

"I'm sorry we startled you," Ralph apologized.

"Now if you'd used your heads, you'da stayed behind that door and tossed a pebble at me. Funny I didn't hear you. Ain't often folks sneak up on me thataway."

"We beg your pardon."

"Ain't a question of beggin' pardon. Question of you gettin' shot. 'Course I ain't got my gun, hocked it last week, but you couldn't know that. Can't figger out, though, how you got so close without me hearin' you."

"You were breaking up the kindling."

"Sure, that was it. Got powerful good ears, hear everything."

Ralph said, "My name is Ralph Bayless and this is Miss Page."

"Howdy to you both. My name's Walt Stauffer. Everybody calls me Walt." He stopped and stared at them. "*Miss Page*, did you say?"

"Miss Page."

"Oh," he grinned knowingly, "so it's thataway."

"No, it is *not* thataway. Miss Page and I merely happen to be travelling together."

"And we wish we weren't," said the girl.

"Well," said Walt, looking puzzled, "in my day when a young feller and a young lady was travellin' together, they was always glad about it."

"Times have changed," Ralph told him. "But since we're strangers around here, could you tell us where we might get some breakfast?"

"Ain't no place nearer than Bigfield for breakfast, lessen you have it with me."

"Then we'd like very much to have it with you."

"How'd you get here? Lost your way?"

"Lost our way, lost my car. It went over the cliff."

"That's bad. Never oughta tried that road. Even Emily don't like that road. Takes it slow and easy. Emily's my sidekick. You'll like Emily. Emily!" he shouted, and then gave a long piercing whistle.

There was a clattering of rocks and around the corner of the building trotted a little grey donkey.

"This is Emily," he said proudly. "Ain't she cute?"

"Very cute," Ralph answered politely, thinking Emily looked a little moth eaten.

"Emily, tell these folks you're glad to know them. Go up and shake hands."

Emily edged over to them and to their amazement held out her hoof, first to Ralph, and then to Leila.

"Glad to know you, Emily," Ralph said, and shook the hoof. Leila did the same.

"Atta girl," praised Walt. "Took me a long time to learn her that trick. Now I gotta give her a little sugar."

Emily, rewarded, trotted back to her grass cropping, and Ralph said pointedly, "It's kind of you to give us breakfast. Miss Page, I am sure, is quite hungry."

"And Mr. Bayless, too," Leila put in quickly. "He's as hungry as I am."

Walt cackled merrily to himself. "Maybe twice as hungry seein' he's a whole lot bigger. But bein' big ain't no advantage. 'Ceptin' maybe in fights. But I say better to use your head and keep outa fights."

"That coffee smells good," Ralph hinted.

"Yep, I make good coffee. No secret. Use plenty coffee. And boil it a long, long time."

"It sure smells good," Ralph said again.

"But the cup sit-yee-ation, it ain't good at all. Fact, it's bad. Don't have many visitors. Fact, never had no visitors. Guess you'll have to dig yourself some cups." He handed Ralph a shovel that was leaning against a post. "Over there in that pile of trash."

"What's this? Some local joke, like snipe hunting?"

Another cackle from Walt. "You 'member that old song about sing for your supper? Now you gotta dig for your breakfast."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"Usta be a restaurant over there. That heap's where they threw out their trash. Find more dern stuff in it. Good old days this usta to be a humdinger of a place. Yep, Pearl was plenty lively! Hard to believe, ain't it?"

It's fallen down, burned down, been carted away. I've burned up a lot of it myself. Most of that there fence I've cooked my grub with. But now you can see the view, and ain't she a lallapalooza?"

He led them to the edge of the bluff. "Pretty, ain't she?"

Ralph and Leila stared where his sweeping arm indicated, off across a wide valley to a long ridge of reddish mountains, etched against an incredibly blue sky. The floor of the valley was rugged and gashed with canyons, and in the far distance a ribbon of green showed where a stream was lined with trees.

Walt pointed to a green patch, wider and deeper than the rest. "That's Beachcroft," he told them, "friend of mine lives there."

"It's a pretty sight, all right," Ralph said, "but right now I'm more interested in digging up those cups." And so he shovelled into the heap and before long he'd turned up a mess of broken china and finally a couple of cups, cracked and handleless, but good enough to hold coffee.

"I'll wash them," Leila offered.

"Rain water in that bucket," Walt told her. "Use all you want. Cistern's full after that rain." Most times water's hard to come by up here. Those dish rags hangin' there are clean. Been through the rain."

Leila washed and wiped the cups. Walt poured coffee into them, black and strong. Then he sliced some pieces off a side of bacon and put them in a frying pan. "Guess we'll have biscuits, too," he said. "Hardtack's good enough for me, but now company's come, we'll have *biscuits*." He took the lid off a can which was half filled with flour, and putting in a little water and some lard, began working the mixture right in the can and rolling it into little balls. "Now, mister, if you please, take that hand axe and put points on three sticks for us."

"Yes, sir," Ralph said, thinking back to one of the happiest times in his life.

He sharpened the sticks and Walt wrapped the pieces of dough around them. "Ever make biscuits like this?"

"Yes, once when I was on a camping trip with the boy scouts."

Leila said, "I was a girl scout. I got all the badges."

"Did you? I got a lot, too."

"Keep turnin' them sticks," Walt interrupted. "And help yourself to bacon and extra coffee. Sorry I ain't got no more to give you."

"Don't apologize," said Ralph. "This is elegant eating."

"You folks is lucky you found me. Don't generally come here this time of year. But I run into some tough breaks, so I high-tailed it back here to build up my finances."

"You find financial opportunities in this metropolis?" Ralph asked.

"Sure do."

"Doing what?"

Walt shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "Not so fast, mister. If I tell you, you might want to horn in on it. Now I beén doin' all the talkin'. That's bad. Fellow talks all the time, he don't learn nothin'. So you air your lungs a while. You say you lost your way and lost your car?"

"It went over the cliff. Burned up with all our possessions, including a thousand dollars in cash which the lady had in her purse."

"A thousand dollars!" Walt gasped. "Seems like you should a had a poke like that on your *body*. Or maybe even in a *bank*."

"I didn't want to put it in the bank. I didn't want any one to know I had it."

Walt eyed her oddly and Ralph said, "It's okay. She didn't *steal* it. Maybe we'll get it back for her. We're going down to the wreck and look through the ashes. If there's anything left of it the treasury will reimburse her."

"A thousand dollars," Walt said slowly. "A lot of dough."

"I hope we find it. Well, we'll go down and look through the remains and then we'll walk back to that town from there. Some little walk!"

"Don't go to Bigfield thataway. Come back here and take the old mule trail. You go right up that butte, and then down the other side. It's steep but you'll make it in three or four hours. The other way'll take you all day."

"We'll do that, and thank you for the breakfast."

"I'll give you lunch, too. The menoo is beans. I got 'em soakin'."

Leila was on her feet, too. "That's nice of you. And I appreciate the breakfast."

"You're welcome, ma'am. And say, mister . . ." He caught Ralph's arm . . . "if you do find that thousand dollars, then I got somethin' mighty pretty back there in the hills and I might cut you in on it."

"I told you, it's not my thousand dollars. It's hers. All I've got is about forty bucks which I hope will get me to the coast."

"Forty dollars ain't such a bad little stake. 'Course a thousand would be better." Walt eyed Leila speculatively.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't be interested in your proposition."

"How can you tell, ma'am, until you know what it is?"

"Well, then, what is it?"

"When you come back I'll tell you. That is if you got the money. If your stake's gone ain't no use me wastin' my words, is there?"

"No," she agreed.

Walt caught Ralph's arm again, his fingers closing down hard. "Wait a minute, mister, and you, too, lady, I got an idea. Even without money you still got assets I could use."

"Have we? What are they?" Ralph asked.

"When you come back we'll talk it over," he told them, his eyes full of cunning. "I got one idea if you got first-class assets, that thousand dollars. I got another idea if all you got is second-class assets. Fact, I even got an idea for your third-class assets."

From where they stood the car looked a total wreck, blackened, twisted, its four wheels up in the air.

"We'll never find anything in that," Leila predicted.

"I'm afraid not, but let's look."

She started to climb over the edge with him when he pulled her back. "Your shoes are no good for this. I'll make it alone."

He left her sitting there and picked his way down over the rocks very carefully. All they needed at this point was for him to break a leg.

Half way to the car he found one of his suitcases, the one that had been in the back seat, not in the trunk, and which held his toilet articles, his robe, some clean shirts and a couple of pairs of slacks. It was scratched and dented, but still intact and locked. He left it where he'd found it, and went on, keeping a sharp lookout for anything else that might have been thrown out, especially Leila's red purse.

When he got to the car he gave up hope of finding anything. Nothing could have survived in that shambles. But he poked about inside. Only ashes and melted metal, the metal still hot. He stood up at last and shook his head violently to let her know the bad news.

On the way up he searched again carefully on both sides for anything he might have missed coming down. No luck. His suitcase was all that had escaped. He carried it with him which made climbing awkward because he needed both hands. But at last he made it and flung himself down beside the girl, exhausted and panting

"No money," he told her.

"I didn't expect any."

"Sorry I couldn't find your overnight case."

"It was up front with my purse."

"Guess the door of the back seat came open but not the one in front. Well, let's count our remaining assets." He pulled out his wallet and thumbed through the bills. "Forty-three dollars. You can have it all. I think it will pay your bus fare to the coast."

She looked at him in amazement. "You'd really give me *all* your money!"

"I'll probably save out enough to send an S.O.S. telegram. If I can think of anyone who's got the money and who'll lend it to me. . . . But what's the matter?"

For Leila had suddenly turned her head away. "I just think it's very nice of you," she said in a choked voice. "I just never expected it."

"It's the knight errant in me. Chivalry is not dead."

"If we'd found my thousand dollars I was going to offer you *half* of it. For your clothes. Maybe you don't believe me, but I was."

"But why wouldn't I believe you? But I couldn't possibly have taken it."

"As a loan you could have."

"Nope. A loan to me usually becomes a gift." He changed the subject and said, "Leila, look out there! Look at that sky, at those mountains! It's a sweet day. Nothing like it in New York."

"Nor in Los Angeles. There's too much smog."

"The sun feels good, doesn't it?" He unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off. "Think I'll get some vitamin D."

He was surprised by the look of embarrassment on her face. Why was she embarrassed? Hadn't she ever seen a man without his shirt before?

"I wonder," she said, carefully looking away from him, "if Walt has the beans on."

"With beans it doesn't matter how long you cook them. But he's going to be disappointed we didn't find the first-class assets."

"What do you suppose our second-class assets are, and our third?"

"He probably wants to sell us some mining stock."

She ran her fingers through her hair. "Before we start down the trail I'll borrow your comb and brush. I must look a mess."

"At least you don't have this." He took her hand and rubbed it along the heavy beard on his chin. Then he opened her hand and kissed the palm. "That's for being generous and wanting to divide your first-class assets."

Hastily she withdrew her hand from his and stood up. "We'd better go. Walt may be ready for us."

He looked at her lazily. "Can't the beans wait?"

"The sooner we have lunch the sooner we can start for Bigfield. We must see how far we can get with that forty-three dollars. I have my wrist watch. You have

one, too. We can probably raise enough money for both fares. It's much better not to borrow if we can possibly help it."

"There speaks the credit woman." Reluctantly he got to his feet and put on his shirt.

3

Walt was sitting on the saloon steps when they reached the top of the hill. "Be'en watchin' you two. You didn't find the money, did you?"

"No, we didn't."

"Knew it the way you walked. You can always tell by the way folks walk if it's good news or bad. So now we gotta figger on your other assets."

"Yes, we'd like to know what they are."

"I been sittin' here gettin' my thoughts organized. You see, this place up here is my ace in the hole. Then I got another ace down there at Beachcroft, but I can't always count on *her*. If her son's around she don't come across. He don't live with her, stays at the hotel in Bigfield when he is in town, but he's always got his nose into things out there at Beachcroft, and him and me, we don't get along. You followin' me?"

"Well, not too closely."

"This other ace—her honest injun name is Edie Beach—well, she's got the mazuma, and when Hubert skidoos I can work on her for a grubstake. But Hubert ain't skidoosed yet, so I got to stay up here and make my livin'."

"How in Sam Hill can you make a living in this place?"

"Don't you call seventy, eighty cents a day a livin'?"

"Well, not exactly."

"I do, because I can *live* on it. Not elegant-like, but I get by. Eighty cents is averagin', see? Some days I don't make that much, some days I make maybe five or ten cents. But other days I make two, three dollars. Now I say this: you throw in with me, let me use your assets, and we'll double, maybe triple the take. With your assets we average two, three dollars a day, certain sure, and pretty sure a whole lot more than that."

"But what are the assets?"

He leaned over and squeezed Ralph's arm. "Your assets is muscles. That's what you got, muscles. And I aim to use them in a way that'll make us profits."

"How?"

"Shovellin', that's how. Shovellin' and bustin' up conglomerate. Now I'll tell it to you simple as I can. There's gold around here. Not much, but *some*. But most times there's no water. So to get the gold you have to dry wash. That just ain't practical. Too much time, too much work, too little gold. But when it rains you can pan. Hard luck again! The conglomerate—that's the stuff that's got the gold in it—ain't near the water. So you gotta dig it up, load it on Emily and pack it down to the water. Then before you pan it you gotta bust up that conglomerate. Now I used to be pretty shovellin' and diggin' and breakin' up rocks but I'm not so young no more and I got this crick in my shoulder. So that's where your muscles come in. Your muscles, my savvy, see? You do the heavy work and I do the washin'. And as for the lady . . ." He turned to Leila and grinned.

"Would you want me to shovel and dig, too?" she asked.

"No, ma'am, that ain't what I have in mind for you."

"Just what did you have in mind for me?"

He winked at her and chuckled. "You see, I don't

believe everything folks tell me. I mean about you two travellin' together, but not bein' happy about it. Seems to me if you ain't happy, you *could* be happy. A young feller workin' up here would get awful lonesome. What I was countin' on from you, ma'am, was your company."

Ralph burst out laughing and said to the embarrassed Leila, "There it is, my girl. Walt's savvy, my muscles, your company."

"Fifty-fifty on what we take," Walt offered. "Fifty for me and fifty for you two. No, I'll do better than that. Make it a three-way split. Each gets a third. That's a fair proposition, ain't it? What do you say?"

"Fair enough!" Ralph told him. "But suppose we run into one of those bad streaks you mentioned. Those five and ten cents days. What do we live off then?"

"We live off the country. Plenty to eat around here without never going to town."

"Now don't kid me." Ralph was sceptical.

"Sure, there's *plenty* to eat. The Injuns found it. We can, too. Long as we got a bullet—course we'd have to get my gun out of hock, but you still got your forty-three dollars, your third-class assets—we can shoot a rabbit and some quail.

"If we ain't got a bullet, we trap the quail. A n't nothin' finer than a nice fat quail roasted over the fire. You get a little wheat and you make a trail into a wire trap—plenty of old wire around here. If you want to make certain sure they go into the trap, you soak the wheat in whiskey, if you got the whiskey, and then they sure-nuff do go in. I always say the whiskey gives 'em a good flavour, too.

"Howsomever, if you haven't got 'whiskey and you haven't got wheat, you can pick mesquite beans, pound 'em up and sprinkle a trail out of them. You can make

mesquite bean flour, too, grind it up on a metate. Ain't bad at all. Or you can find packrat nests with nuts and seeds all gathered in a heap for you. If you're really up against it you can catch the packrat and eat *him*.

"But we ain't going to have luck so bad we don't make *nothin'*. We'll always make enough for flour, beans, lard, a side of bacon. And when Hubert vanmooses—and he's gettin' all set for a trip around the world and ain't that elegant?—we'll work on Mrs. Beach and maybe she'll grubstake us and we'll go out to that something very pretty I got back in those hills. I'm in forty feet and she looks promisin'. But it'll take a heap of diggin'."

"Walt," said Ralph, "you make it all sound swell. Doesn't he, Leila?" He dropped his eye at her in a wink. "But what about living quarters? Our accommodations of last night were not so hot."

"Oh, that old saloon ain't *too* bad. Feller up here, four, five years ago—he's the one who brought in the mattress—he liked it fine. Then he went away. But with a little fixing you could be mighty comfortable in that saloon. 'Course there are houses and houses you could live in up the hill up there in High Pearl—you ain't seen nothin' of the town yet—but there's one bad feature to livin' up the hill. . . . I really gotta tell you."

"And what's that?"

"The houses ain't *safe*. Company that was here last got greedy, mined all underneath them residences. 'Time to time there's a cave-in, one of the houses sinks into the mine. Don't happen often, but it *happens*."

"I can see," said Ralph seriously, "how that would be worrisome."

"But down heré in Low Pearl," Walt went on, "it's *solid*. I say better be solid in a saloon than not solid in a regular house."

"Walt, you've certainly got a point there."

"Nother bet for you is the old undertakin' parlour. If you ain't afraid of spooks, it ain't a bad place. Couldn't live there myself. I'd remember all the people laid out in that place."

"I don't think I take to the idea of the undertaking parlour, do you, Leila?" Ralph asked.

She shook her head at him. "This is all nonsense! Don't you think we should have our lunch and be on our way?"

As if he hadn't heard her, Walt said, "I got myself fixed up mighty comfortable. Come and look."

He led them into what had been the dining-room of the restaurant. The roof had some holes in it, but he'd stretched a piece of canvas over his bed—an old brass bed with springs and not too bad a mattress—and he was, as he said, "snug as a bug in a rug". By the bed was a rickety table and on it a coffee can filled with grease in which a rag was embedded. "That's my lamp. But I don't use it much. Come dark I go to sleep." On another table were a few more of his possessions. "Everything I need here," he said proudly. "No sense ownin' *things*. You don't own *them*. They own *you*. My wife—had a wife once, but she died on me—my wife, she was an *owner*. More danged things she owned, and always put 'em in mothballs, takin' 'em out of mothballs, rubbin' on wax, rubbin' off wax. Don't make no sense."

He looked at Leila. "'Course, ma'am, you bein' a woman, you'd like it a mite more cosy. Shelves, maybe. Women always like *shelves*. Well, plenty wood 'round here. Shelves ain't no problem. And maybe you'd be wantin' curtains at the windows, though there ain't nobody to be lookin' in. Well, they got real pretty calico down in Bigfield, and . . ."

"Really, Mr. Stauffer . . ." Leila began.

"Now I ain't showed you everything," he interrupted. "Look here in the old pantry. I got a kinda bathroom."

He showed them how he'd rigged up some pieces of tin on the roof and when it rained the water washed down into an old sink. "'Course when it don't rain, I don't get a bath, but no sense in washin' yourself *all* the time." He tapped a pipe. "And here's where water comes from the cistern, but you can't always count on that."

Looking at them quizzically, he said, "Nothin's too good for company. If you two was to like this place better than the saloon, I'm willin' to trade."

"Why, that's mighty kind of you, Walt," Ralph said. "But we wouldn't think of turning you out. If we stay I'm sure the saloon will be all right for us. Don't you think so, Leila?" His eyes begged her to join in the joke.

"Charming," she answered. "I can't think of anything nicer than setting up housekeeping in a saloon."

"You mean it, ma'am?" said Walt, missing the sarcasm entirely. "Let's go take a look at it and maybe I'll have some ideas about how you can furnish it."

As they followed behind him Ralph said under his breath to Leila, "What a character! You wouldn't believe it if you saw him on the stage, would you?"

"This is all so stupid!"

"Oh, come on, Leila. Let's play along with him. Let's see how he's going to furnish the saloon for us."

"Now don't *rush* me," Walt told them as they came together by the old stove. "I get good ideas but sometimes they come slow."

"Take all the time you want, Walt."

The little man paced up and down the long room,

his hand scratching his head. "Maybe," he said at last, indicating the painting on the mirror, "you'll want to cover up that there woman."

"Veil that work of art!" cried Ralph. "Never! You wouldn't want her charms covered up, would you, Leila?"

"Certainly not," she answered wearily.

"Well, then," said Walt, "there's this here old mattress. You didn't find it easy sleeping on it last night, did you?"

"No, Walt, we didn't, but we used it to keep from getting pneumonia. It's an arrangement that will not continue," Ralph answered him.

"They say some folks like twin beds."

"It's the modern way, Walt."

"Well, you could make yourself a couple of bunk beds. Plenty wood and nails here. And for underneath, boughs. Mighty comfortable on a bough bed."

"As a boy scout I've slept on a bough bed. But I had a sleeping bag to put on top of it. What'll we use for blankets? You don't happen to have some spare eider-downs, Walt?"

"Just got that bedroll I been sleepin' in for twenty years. Might be able to slip you out one blanket."

"Oh, no, we wouldn't think of depriving you of the blanket you've had for twenty years," Ralph said hastily.

"Blankets is sure goin' to be a problem," Walt worried.

Ralph turned to Leila and said, "Don't look so glum, Leila, you're not going to be cold. We'll think of something."

Leila just shook her head.

Walt snapped his fingers. "The old newspaper office. Must be a ton of old papers there."

"You mean wrap them around us like the tramps do in Central Park?"

"You ever slept on a straw tick?"

"No."

Walt looked up toward the ceiling. "Plenty of can^{as} up there and pieces in other stores, too. I got a big needle somewheres. You ravel out some thread and you sew some pieces together, make a kinda bag. Then you take the old newspapers and tear them, wad them up, and stuff them into the bag. Well, why not?"

"Sounds okay, Walt. A paper tick instead of a straw tick."

"So now we got the beds fixed up. Put 'em right here along this wall."

"Walt, you still don't realize just how modern we are. We'd need *separate* rooms, too."

Again Walt scratched his head. "You're too danged modern for me. Well, we'll fix that, too. There's stores on either side of this saloon. You can break through to those places. So then you make this the parlour and the bedrooms t' either side." He then turned to Leila. "About the furniture, ma'am, we'll go scavengin' in those houses up the hill. I'll bet we find all kinda things. It's goin' to be awful pleasant havin' neighbours down here."

"Mr. Stauffer," Leila told him gently, "I'm afraid we've been amusing ourselves at your expense. Mr. Bayless hasn't the slightest intention of staying here and neither have I. So I think we should have our lunch that you so kindly offered us and be on our way."

"Now you just hold your horses a bit. I got somethin' *else* to show you, somethin' very interestin'! You wait here."

He scampered out and Leila said, "It's mean to get his hopes up an' let him think we're stayin' when we aren't."

"But I think I *am* stayin'!"

"You couldn't possibly stay here."

"Why not? I think it would be an experience. Prospecting with Walt, living off the country. It's the beach-comber in me. Good for my morals, too. No drink. If I have any whiskey I'll give it to the quail. No women. Unless you stay. Why don't you?"

When she didn't answer he continued, "Haven't you ever done anything completely mad and idiotic?"

"No, I haven't."

"Time you began."

"You are the most amazing man."

"I might write a book about it, like those men on that raft. How to survive in a ghost town. I'll have a beard to my knees and I'll write a best-seller. What's wrong with that idea?"

"Have you ever done any writing?"

"No, but I could start."

She stood there frowning and he reached out and took her by the shoulders.

"Leila, do something for me."

"What?" she asked, stiffening under his hands.

"Smile! You're so pretty when you smile, and most of the time you look so grim."

"How can I help it when such grim things happen to me?" She pulled away from him.

"One smile and I'll let you go."

So she smiled at him and he dropped his hands.

"Now," said Walt, hurrying in from the back, "you come outside where we can see real good and I'll show you what I've got in my hand. Means I'm trustin' you a lot to let you in on this. I ain't so broke as I make out."

Outside in the bright sunlight he opened up his hand. There on his palm lay a small glass bottle and inside was about a thimbleful of tiny nuggets. "This here's

worth 'bout twenty-eight dollars and I found it in *one* day. Ran onto a little pocket. Month ago I struck a pocket, too. About sixteen dollars in that one. So you see, not only is there eatin' money up here, there's drinkin' money, too." He held the little bottle up to the sun. "Ain't she pretty? Ain't nothing prettier than gold shining in the sunlight. Fact, it's pretty in *any* kind of light."

"Walt," said Ralph, "you've sold me. I'm going to stay up here for a while and help you hunt gold." He turned to Leila. "After lunch I'll go into Bigfield with you and start you on your way to the coast."

"We ain't goin' to have your company?" Walt said. "Now that's too bad."

"No, it isn't," Leila said a little breathlessly. "I mean it isn't too bad because I'm *staying*. I mean I'm not *going*. Well," she said defensively to Ralph, "I have just as much right to stay here as you have. Walt asked me, too."

"Yes, he did," Ralph said slowly, "but it seems to me you ought to be a little more joyful about it."

"How can I seem joyful when I'm not joyful?"

"Maybe, folks," said Walt, "you two oughta talk this over private, by yourselves. I'll vamoose and go stir the beans." He sped out the back again.

"Now," Ralph asked her, "what's this all about? Should I feel flattered?"

She ignored his last question. "You were the one who said I should begin to do mad and idiotic things."

"That's right."

"So now . . . I'm doing them. I'm staying here."

"To be company for me?"

"Yes, but not . . . not . . . I mean . . ."

"You mean not *romantic* company?"

"Yes. We'll be company for *each other*. But my real reason is the *gold*. I hope to find enough gold to pay my bus fare."

Ralph laughed and took her chin in his hand. "Leila, that's a perfectly good reason. Don't look so miserable about it. One smile, please."

So she smiled wanly and he laughed again, and took her arm. "Let's go eat the beans."

4

Ralph had worked on the saloon's half doors and both of them were now swinging freely. With a sharp nail he scratched on one of them, "Miss Page," and on the other, "Mr. Bayless."

"There!" he said. "People will now know who lives inside. Our little grey home in the west. Too bad we haven't a door knocker. It would give us just the right touch. Quaint, you know, and early American."

"What we really need," said Leila seriously, "are other, regular doors behind to keep out the wind. A door knocker isn't necessary at all."

He turned and looked at her, smiling slightly. "Leila, persiflage is not in you. And the next time when you pick up a ride in a car, ask the man how tall he is before you get in."

"Why?"

"So that if you have to wear his clothes, they'll fit you better than mine do."

"But I don't imagine there will be a next time. I imagine this is the sort of thing that happens only once. Anyway, I don't worry about your clothes being too large."

I'm glad I have them. They let me save my suit. You were very kind to divide up everything with me."

"Wouldn't you have shared with me if it had been your suitcase we found instead of mine?"

"Yes, I would, but you couldn't have worn my dresses."

"Hardly." He held a door open. "After you, my lady."

Inside an amazing change had taken place. Three people—for Walt had helped them a lot—working very hard for a long afternoon can accomplish wonders, even with ghost-town materials.

Walt had said after lunch, "Well, what you folks want to hunt first? Gold? Or furniture?"

"Gold," cried Ralph.

"Furniture," said Leila in the same breath.

"Just like a woman, always wanting to feather her nest."

"We should get settled."

"Okay," said Walt. "We'll go up into the society section, to High Pearl. That's where we'll find the most, if there's anything to find."

"Is it safe to go there?" Leila asked.

"Why not?"

"Those cave-ins you told us about."

"Oh, sure, the cave-ins." Walt nodded. "But we'd hear a rumblin' and feel a shiverin' first. We'd have time to run."

Walt led them down the rutted street, past the mouldering buildings with their false fronts and broken window-panes, and then, turning sharply, they ascended a steep road—now no more than a trail—that brought them to a little plateau, where a dozen or so pretentious houses—at least they had been pretentious once—were falling into decay.

"Ain't been over here in years. Never got *invited* when the town was goin' strong, so why come moseyin' over when the dang thing's all through? That biggest place there is where the superintendent lived. Don't think he left nothin' behind, the old skinflint. Too mean. But let's go look."

There was an old broom leaning up against the sagging porch and Leila said, "I see something already."

"Now you ain't goin' to do a lot of housekeepin'."

"We're certainly going to clean up that dirt."

"But the dirt up here is *clean* dirt, it ain't *dirty* dirt." Walt turned to Ralph, seeking agreement. "You goin' to let her break her back housecleanin'?"

"No, I'll break mine. We'll have to do *some* cleaning."

Walt picked up the broom. "Okay, but a little dirt never hurt nobody."

They went inside and found the rooms completely bare, just as Walt had predicted.

"Seems to me," he said, "I remember his wife bein' a paintin' lady and havin' a big room up in the attic. But how do you get up there? Ain't no stairs."

"Maybe through a trap door," Ralph said. "Let's look in the closets."

In a bedroom closet they found the trap door, but no ladder to reach it.

"I'll lift you up, Walt. See what's up there. Probably nothing."

Walt couldn't have weighed more than a hundred pounds. Ralph got him up on his shoulders. Walt pushed aside the boards that covered the opening. "Jiminy Christmas, all kinda stuff here! Wait a minute. I see a ladder. Gimme a boost."

Ralph pushed him over the top and immediately Walt let down a ladder. "Better try it first."

Ralph tested it gingerly and said to Leila, "If it holds me it'll hold you."

He mounted the ladder cautiously, and after he had made it Leila followed.

The attic was an enormous room, floored, running the whole length of the house, and at the north end was a big window, some of its panes now broken.

There was an easel, some old canvases, mostly daubs.

"Guess those were her practice work," Walt conjectured.

"Or maybe her supreme masterpieces," said Ralph. "You can't tell."

"She was kinda queer as I remember. Usta come up here and paint and paint."

Piles of old magazines rose to the rafters, and there were several old trunks, empty. And, lucky find, hanging on either side of the big north window were blankets, or what Leila and Ralph could use for blankets. Evidently the painting lady hadn't always wanted the north light because from the curtain rod hung long drapes, of some thick heavy woollen material, lined and interlined.

Ralph stood on the table and pulled them down. "I'm glad we found these. That paper-tick idea never sounded comfortable. Now if we can just pick up some old springs."

"I've seen some around," said Walt. "We'll find 'em."

"Then we're fixed. Cut that mattress in two—I suppose you've got a knife sharp enough—and then with the springs and these drapes, we're set. Nothing lacking but the percale sheets, and the eiderdown pillows."

"Don't count on findin' no sheets," Walt warned.

They didn't find sheets, but after they searched the attic and scavenged through several more houses and on a dump heap they found other things. Some springs were

located. Springs much the worse for rust, but still springs, and better than boards to sleep on. They found some chairs that were sittable, a chest that would hold things, if they had anything to put in it. They found a tea kettle, battered, but without holes, several pots and pans. Two of the larger ones could be used for wash basins. Half an ironing board turned up and an old flat iron. There were plenty of old mops, and several put together would make one decent one. They even found a sizeable piece of yellow soap, completely dry, but it would probably make suds in water.

"Don't worry about soap," Walt said. "Plenty amole weed growin' all over the hills. You just pound up the roots."

In one shallow ravine they found an old automobile, its wheels and engine gone, but its seats still inside. "Those," said Ralph, "will be our davenport. Period pieces to go with that old stove."

So by sunset, with much carrying and hauling, with much sweeping and mopping, they had the saloon fairly livable. They'd broken through to the stores on either side. Leila's "boudoir" was on the left, Ralph's "dressing-room" on the right. Their beds were set up, and although the springs sagged and the pieces of mattress were lumpy, the inner linings of the drapes were smooth, and they were going to be a lot more comfortable than they'd been the night before.

The two auto seats before the stove were cosy, to say the least—Ralph had them braced with piles of bricks—and one of the old steamer trunks from the attic made a coffee table. An old muffin tin served for an ash tray.

"You don't smoke," Ralph said to Leila, "and I, of necessity, am giving it up, but still I like the idea of having an ash tray."

"Glad to lend you some of my chewin' tobacco," Walt offered. "Good old 'Tiger Claw.'"

"Thank you, no. I've wanted to give up smoking for a long time. It's bad for my voice. And now's a good time to be heroic."

"Guess you folks is gettin' hungry," Walt said. "I'll go heat up the beans and I got dessert for you tonight, too. Prunes."

Ralph peered into the tea kettle. "There's enough hot water left for each of us to wash."

He had shaved and put on a clean shirt and another pair of slacks. Leila put on his lévis, held up by an old necktie used as a belt, and she wore one of his white shirts. She was, of course, swallowed up in them and Ralph said he was going to call her "Jackie Coogan," and that it suited her to look like a ragamuffin.

They'd had dinner. And besides the beans and the prunes there'd been a queer sort of thing for a green vegetable. It looked a little like string beans, but wasn't, and Walt refused at first to tell them what they were eating. Eventually, when they'd given up guessing, he said it was a very young and tender prickly-pear cactus, sliced into narrow strips.

They'd eaten enormously and Ralph remarked that he didn't mind at all having beans again.

"You'd all-fired better not mind," Walt advised him. "You're goin' to get 'em *all* the time!"

Ralph and Leila went back to the saloon and sat on the auto seats. The evening chill was taken off by the heat from the stove.

"I'm glad we found that flat iron," Leila said, "and that piece of ironing board. Now I can press my suit, and I can press your clothes, too. Then we'll look all right to go to town. We'll have to go *some* time. I ought

"I write to my cousin. Don't you have to write to people, too?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But mostly my letters have been asking people for money. So they're not crazy to hear from me. It's going to be quite a walk, too. Three hours down that mule trail, Walt says, and at least five hours back."

"We'll have to start early. But maybe we shouldn't go until we know whether we're staying or not. In a few days we'll know if we're going to find any gold. If we *are* staying—then we'll have to buy a few things and we'll have to use some of your money."

She drew from her pocket the little notebook he had given her and a pencil. "While you were shaving I made out a list. We should spend only for the barest necessities, the *barest*!"

"Okay, let's hear the list. Wait a minute, you can't read by that light." He pulled open the stove's door and stuffed in some kindling which immediately caught and gave a readable light. "There, pretend you're Abraham Lincoln, getting his education. What's your first item?"

"Well, at first I put down lighter fluid . . ."

"Yes, we'll need that."

"But it wouldn't cost us anything to get matches. Don't they give away those little books of matches in bars and hotels? Couldn't you just pick up a supply?"

"Yes, I could, but usually they expect you to buy a drink, and that would cost more than the bottle of fluid."

"But this is an *emergency*."

"Okay, I'll scoop up a supply of matches. But we'd better have one bottle of fluid just in case. Next item?"

"One candle. At first I put down two, so that each of us could have a light if there was some trouble in the middle of the night. But then I thought if there was

trouble, the one in trouble would call the other, and the one with the candle would bring it to the one without the candle."

Ralph gave a sudden loud laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing, Leila. I just felt like laughing. One candle, then, and we *could* cut it in half. Go on."

"Two bars of hand soap, in case that amole weed isn't any good. The yellow piece we found we'll save for washing clothes."

"Check. Two bars of soap. What else?"

"What about medicine? I've got a question mark after that. We have your aspirin."

"I think we'll have to take a chance on keeping well."

"That's all then."

"Fluid, matches, candle, soap—that's your entire list?"

"I was keeping to bare necessities."

"Bare is the word."

"You'll want things, too. Razor blades?"

"I've got enough blades." He thought for a minute, chuckling to himself. "Bayless, the sybarite, and I can't think of a thing I want." He took the list from her and stared at it. "But why did you cross off the lipstick?"

"Well, it's a luxury and I don't use much make-up."

"A girl's entitled to a lipstick. Can't you get one for ten cents at Woolworth's?"

"Yes, but it's still a luxury, and there's a twenty-percent luxury tax."

"Okay! That's only twelve cents, and think of it this way: It will keep your lips from chapping. You'll be out in the sun a lot. You'll need that lipstick while you pan for gold."

"But then you'll need one, too, one of those white ones."

"All right, a chapstick for me."

After a minute he said, "I might let my beard grow and my hair, too. It would make me more picturesque and besides haircuts cost money. You've never cut hair, have you?"

"No, I haven't, but I could try."

"I wish you wouldn't, and the only scissors we have are my nail clips."

"I think we ought to get along with as little as possible. Then if you write that book it'll be more exciting."

"But Leila, even if I were wallowing in luxury up here, I wouldn't have to let my readers know about it."

"That wouldn't be *honest*!"

"No, probably not. But think of all the books that wouldn't get written if their authors were honest. Hey, you haven't put down a toothbrush for yourself."

"I'm getting along all right with Walt's idea—that little twig shredded at one end."

"Well, if you insist upon being Spartan . . . But isn't there *anything* else you want?"

"Yes, there is, but I'm afraid it will cost about thirty-five cents."

"All of thirty-five cents."

"It's completely non-essential. It's a quarter of a pound of tea."

"You're a tea-drinker?"

"At night I am. I got the habit with my aunt. We used to have a cup of tea just before going to bed. Having that kettle made me think of it. At night when we came back here from dinner, we could make some tea and sit here and drink it. I think that would be nice. And a hot liquid in your stomach before you go to sleep is very good for you. It's like a toddy, I imagine."

Ralph thought: What an absurd, serious creature she is. He felt a surge of tenderness toward her. "Leila, you must have your tea and I'll even buy us *two cups* with handles."

"Oh, no, that would be complete extravagance! But if I get my tea, you should have some luxury that you want for the same price."

He shook his head. "It's strange but I can't think of a single luxury for thirty-five cents that I crave."

"Even for *more* than that, if you really wanted it. We do have other assets besides your money. Remember: our watches. We could sell them."

"And I suppose I could wangle a loan from somebody. Seems to me I have a couple of friends I haven't touched lately."

"I could borrow from my cousin but I don't want to."

He put more wood on the fire and then shut the stove's door. The warm half-light enclosed them.

"Ever been in love, Leila?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," she said.

"What happened?"

"He married another girl."

"Still carrying the torch?"

"What?"

"Are you still in love with him?"

"I don't think so. No."

"Well, I've been in love many times. One of my nicknames is 'Casanova.' Another is 'Love-'em-and-leave-'em Bayless.' At heart I'm a philanderer. Also I've sometimes been called a wolf."

"I shouldn't think that would be much fun."

"No? Well, it's lots of fun."

"Flitting about. I think for real love you have well, not flit."

"Casanova Bayless," he remarked thoughtfully, "all cozy and snug with a girl in a ghost town. Who would ever believe it? Who would ever believe that Bayless could share a house—a saloon—with a girl and not make passes at her? Of course he's used to the kind of girl who expects passes, who'd feel insulted if he didn't make a pass."

"I suppose I'm quite different from most of the girls you know."

"Quite."

She got to her feet, ending the conversation. "We ought to get our rest. Tomorrow we have to start hunting gold."

He stood up, too. "'That's right."

"Well, good night, and try to think of some luxury you want to make up for my tea."

"I'll dream on it."

She called to him through the darkness, "I feel so guilty having your robe."

"Why? I have my pyjamas."

"It's so lovely and soft. I don't think I ever felt wool so smooth and soft."

"Should be. It's cashmere. And what I paid for it! One hundred and twenty-five dollars!"

"No!" she cried.

"But that was the week I was making two hundred."

"But a robe you could do without. I mean, if you were really trying to budget . . ."

"But I wasn't really trying to budget. I wanted the robe. I got it. I'm glad I did. You're sleeping in it. Stop badgering me about how I used to spend money. You sound like a wife."

"I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I apologize."

"You're forgiven. And I am a spendthrift." He was

just dozing off when an idea came to him. "Leila," he called, "are you awake?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know what I want for my luxury now."

"What?"

"A medal," he told her, "a little tin medal."

"But what for?"

"To wear on my chest, of course. For being a noble guy."

5

The trail which led down to the wash went by the big crosscut tunnel which was one of the entrances into the old mine. Walt let them go in for just a few feet. He said it wasn't safe, that the timbering was rotten, that they might fall down a shaft, that there might even be gas.

"If we had us a canary in a cage, we might chance it. A canary'd tell us if there was gas. But we ain't got a canary."

"How could a canary tell us if there was gas?" Ralph asked.

"'Cause to kill a canary takes just a mite of gas. So when the canary turned up his toes we'd turn tail and get the hell out."

"I see," said Ralph. "Leila, put down on your list, along with the candle and matches and lipstick, one canary."

Leila opened her mouth to protest and then said timidly, "You're joking, aren't you?"

He grinned at her. "How did you ever guess?"

"Ain't nothin' to see in there," Walt said, "just tunnels and rocks. One cave around here you'll likely want to

See is the dead injun place. A whole mess of skeletons in there, dozens of them. Awful spooky place. Take you there sometime. Well, let's mosey down to the wash. And where the heck is Emily?" He whistled long and piercingly, and after a little Emily hove into view, grass trailing from her mouth, on her back empty saddle bags, a couple of miners' pans, a kettle, a pick and a shovel.

"Too bad, Emily, cut in on your breakfast, but we got work to do."

They half walked, half slid down the steep trail. At the bottom of it was the broad, sandy wash, in its middle a narrow, shallow stream. At one spot was a pile of what looked like rocks.

"There she is," said Walt proudly. "There's your gold."

Ralph pushed at the heap with his foot. "To me it looks like rocks."

"It ain't rocks, it's conglomerate, a mess of clay and pebbles. I've already busted it up. Now you watch what I'm goin' to do."

He took the shovel from Emily's back and dug a little hole at the edge of the stream. The water flowed into it. "Now, this here's our pannin' pool; this here's where we wash." Into the broad, shallow pan he heaped the conglomerate and then he put the pan and its contents down into the pool so that the water covered it completely. He worked the mixture with his hands, throwing out some of the larger pebbles, breaking up the lumps of clay.

"All right, now we're startin'. First I whirl my pan round this way, under water all the time, then I change and whirl it round t'other way. And then back the first way, and t'other way. Goin' fast, see, iogglin' everything

about, so the stuff in the pan is all riled up, and the gold's beginnin' to drop to the bottom. 'Cause the gold is heavy, see, lots heavier'n the other stuff. Then I put my hands back here, so I'm tippin' the pan a mite, and round and round I go again. Round thisaway, and round thataway. So the light stuff's comin' to the top, see, and washin' off. Then I lift the pan a mite more, and round and round I go, and the stuff's still washin' out. Sometimes I help it along a bit, pushin' with my thumb. And round and round . . . And look what we got!"

Triumphantly he lifted the pan clear of the water and held it up to them. In it was black sand and three bright little nuggets, no larger than pinheads, but nuggets nevertheless.

"Oh," cried Leila, "it's gold!"

"Sure is. 'Maybe twenty cents' worth right there."

"But you did it so quickly!"

"Ain't no use takin' too much time for twenty cents. Wanta try it?"

"I'd like to."

"Save our concentrates." He poured the gold and the black sand into the kettle he'd brought, and then filled up both of the miners' pans from the heap of conglomerate and put them under the water. "Now you both try it."

Leila started to move her pan around and around immediately.

"No," said Walt. "First you work it with your hands, throw out the rocks, break up the lumps."

"It's like mudpies," said Leila, paddling in the mixture vigorously and throwing out rocks by the handfuls.

"Hey," shouted Walt, "that there's dirt, not rock. Might be gold in it."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Might not be gold, too. Keep on breakin' up them lumps. Now you can lift it and start goin' round and round."

"Oh, it's heavy!"

"Dern right, it's heavy. Pannin' is hard work."

Under Walt's directions they rotated their pans one way and then another, and at the end they, too, had black sand and a little colour, but no nuggets.

"You got the idea," he praised, "you got it quick. Now we'll go sashayin' up the canyon a piece and I'll show you where the gold comes from."

They stepped across the stream, Emily following, and walked up another sandy wash, dry, this one, and fed on either side by narrow gulches. After about a mile they came to a bigger gulch and Walt said, "Now we got ourselves a little climb."

They clambered up over the rocks, Ralph from time to time giving Leila a boost. They came at last to the overhanging cliff where Walt had been digging.

"Here it is," he said, "here's my little mint."

"Why did you pick this particular spot?" Ralph asked. "Did you flip a coin?"

"Nope, didn't do no flippin'. I *sampled*. Went all over the place, diggin' and testin'. Filled my sample bags, took 'em back to the water and panned 'em. The stuff from here panned out the richest. This here's the bedrock of the river, the *old* bedrock, when the river was up here instead of down there. And the water pushed the heavy gold along and it worked down into the bedrock."

"Well," said Leila, "if the gold is coming from some place, why don't we *find* that place?"

Walt gave his high, cackling laugh and said, "Lady, that's what every dern miner's hopin' for, to find the

mother lode. Can't never tell. Maybe we'll find it. Right here we might hit a stringer that'd lead us to it."

He handed the pick to Ralph. "You start diggin' where I showed you and I'll load the bags with the stuff I dug before. Then me and the lady'll go down and pan at the stream."

"Hey," said Ralph, "I thought Leila was to be company for me."

"Do you want me to stay?" Leila asked.

"No," he said, and saw in surprise that her face fell slightly. "I mean, you can't dig. It's better for you to help Walt pan."

As Walt loaded the saddle bags, Leila's eye was caught by something bright and shiny. She picked up the rock and held it out to Walt. "Is this gold?"

"No, that's mica. And you can count on this: if you ask is it gold, it *ain't* gold. 'Cause gold is gold and there's nary a doubt. But keep on a-lookin'. Maybe you'll find a nugget, maybe a *big* one."

Ralph leaned on his pick. "Do you think that's likely when all this ground must have been prospected over and over again?"

"Can't never tell. In Montana once I found me a piece of gold big as a marble right near where twenty fellers had been diggin' all summer." He gave Emily a slap on the rump. "Get goin', girl." He said over his shoulder, "Me and the lady'll be findin' some nuggets. I'm promising you."

Ralph stood and watched them climbing down, the little man and the girl, with the donkey following. I should have let her stay, he thought to himself. She looked hurt when I told her I didn't need her.

He swung the pick into the rock and he hadn't been

swinging it long before he realized it was going to be awfully hard work, and also a damned bore.

At noon he decided he'd had enough. He'd be stiff and aching the next day. No use putting his second-class assets out of commission. Even so Walt should be pleased with the amount of stuff he'd brought down.

He made his way down the gulch and into the wash. Ahead of him he could see the two figures bent over their pans. Neither heard him coming.

"Boo!" he said to Leila, dropping down beside her. "Got any gold for Papa?"

She looked up startled, while Walt cried, "One of these days you're goin' to get shot the way you creep up on people."

"How can you make noise going through sand?"

"A little ways off, let out a yell."

"Okay, Walt, next time I yell."

"We've found lots of gold," Leila said happily. "Look in that kettle."

Ralph peered into the kettle and saw a little gold and a lot of black sand. "Is that all? I expected a cupful at least."

"Humph!" snorted Walt. "What you see there's about four dollars' worth. What you can't see is four times more."

"I thought you could always see gold."

"Nope, you can't." He put down his pan and came over to them. "I didn't tell you all about gold this mornin'. Guess it would take too long. But this gold you can't see—well, you pick it up with quicksilver. This here black sand's got a lot of gold in it, too fine to see, but it's there, all right. So you stir in some quicksilver and the quicksilver picks up the gold. So then what you got is amalgam, that's the gold and the quicksilver. Then you

lift out the amalgam and you make the quicksilver let go of the gold, and then you've got your gold. See what I mean?"

"No," said Ralph, "I don't, but I guess you do, and that's what counts." He stared into the kettle. "That black sand doesn't look very auriferous to me. How do you make the quicksilver let go of the gold?"

"Two, three ways. Heating, nitric acid, or you take it to an assay feller and he does it for you. When Hubert goes away and I can tackle Mrs. Beach, I'll maybe have some money for quicksilver. I keep watchin' for that smoke signal. You watchin' too?"

"We're watching," Ralph said, "but I can't even see the roof of that barn you're always talking about."

"You oughta get yourself some glasses, young feller."

"I tested 20-20 in the navy."

"I can't see the barn either," said Leila, "but I *am* a little near-sighted."

"Well," said Walt, irritation in his voice, "that hay barn with the tin roof sure enough's there and I can see it. If you folks can't then my eyes is the best. Anyhow, when Hubert goes Mrs. Beach'll send up a smoke signal, and then we'll all go down and call on the old lady."

"Shouldn't be long now till Hubert's packin' up and he'll stay gone for a long, long time. Hubert's got himself an export-import business—don't need it with all grandpa's money—but thataway he can go sashayin' all over the world. So just you be patient now, Junior'll skidoo, and then you'll meet Mrs. Beach. She'll give us some mighty tasty meals, too."

"We'll be glad to see her in the flesh," said Ralph, "and as for meals, what about those biscuits?"

They ate the cold biscuits spread with bacon grease

that Walt had brought for lunch and three dried prunes apiece.

"Slightly different from Sardi's," Ralph observed, "but I'm not complaining."

"Who's Sardi?" Walt asked. "Friend of yours?"

"He runs a restaurant in New York."

"Give pretty good chow?"

"Pretty good chow, Walt."

"Bet this Sardi feller don't have a sun like this, and that there blue sky."

"Bet he doesn't either, Walt," Ralph agreed.

For the rest of the afternoon they panned, Ralph alternating with Leila. It certainly pulled muscles across his back that he didn't know he had. They did not find much more gold, but they got a lot of black sand which, Walt said, had a lot of gold in it. And as soon as he could get hold of some quicksilver, the quicksilver would pick up the gold, and he'd show them what they'd found.

For a week they dug and panned and the mason jar which was their bank was half full of black sand and gold. Its official resting place was on the counter of the saloon, right beneath the left elbow of the naked lady. Every night, after dinner, the day's gleanings were transferred from the old kettle into the mason jar, and Walt said they'd been extraordinarily lucky. He figured the gold in that jar might run to forty-five dollars fifteen dollars for each of them.

"I told you," he said to Ralph. "Your muscles, my savvy. We're going places. We'll hit a pocket yet."

And in a pocket, you never could tell, you might find a hundred dollars' worth of gold, might find a thousand.

That night Ralph put the mason jar in its accustomed place and said somewhat scornfully, "Fifteen dollars each, Leila. Aren't you impressed?"

"Yes, I am. It's a lot, isn't it?"

"A lot? Are you serious?"

"Well, it's all *profit*. No deductions out of it, no withholding tax, no social security, no unemployment insurance, no hospitalization. No rent, no food, no clothes, no transportation. If you've ever lived on a budget, fifteen dollars for your very own at the end of a week is a great deal."

"Well, I never lived on a budget, and I don't think fifteen dollars is a lot."

"In seven weeks it will be over a hundred, if we keep on making that much."

"I'm wondering . . ." He held up the bottle and looked at it measuringly. "I'm wondering if it is worth what Walt says it is."

"What do you mean?"

"He says this bottle has forty-five dollars' worth of gold in it. I can see the nuggets and the little bit of flour gold. Walt says they are worth about ten dollars. Then the other thirty-five dollars is in gold we *can't see*, the gold in the black sand. And we'll get that *when* we have the quicksilver to pick it up."

"But why should Walt want to lie to us?"

"That's easy. To keep us here, of course."

"But why?"

"I don't know why. But if we can make this much and we're rank amateurs, why isn't the place crawling with prospectors?"

"But this is unusual. Walt says we've run into some very rich dirt."

"Could be." He put the bottle down. "And I'm wondering if that Mrs. Beach just exists in his head and nowhere else. How can he see that barn when we can't?"

"He may be far-sighted. Old people are."

"Yes, that could be, too. There seems to be an answer for everything. Oh, well . . . Let's make a fire. It's strange how cold it gets up here once the sun goes down."

When the flames were roaring they sat down on the old auto seats.

"Another thing," Ralph asked Leila, "when you find nuggets in your pan, are you by yourself or is he at your elbow?"

"I don't know," she said slowly, "most of the nuggets get found in his pan."

"Exactly. I'm beginning to think not even the gold we can see is on the up-and-up. I think he's salting. 'Salting,' as I remember from the westerns I used to read, is an old prospector's word. It means to throw in some gold so the tenderfoot will think he's striking it rich when he's not striking it rich at all."

"But what you're thinking doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it does make sense. And take, for instance, the place where he tells me to dig now. If I was digging the right stuff at first, I'm not digging anything like it now. And he doesn't even bother about packing it down for panning."

"But he told you why. He's trying to find a stringer; you know, the little vein of gold that might lead to a pocket or to the mother lode."

"Yes, that's what *he* says. But I'll tell you what we're going to do, Leila. We're going to take a day off and go to town. We'll get that candle and those matches and that lipstick and your tea and . . . we'll take that bottle to an assayer and run a test on it."

"I think that's a very good idea."

"It *is* a good idea. We'll go day after tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll spend digging, so he'll have plenty of stuff to pan if he wants to pan, or to leave here if that's what

he wants, and then we'll go into town and find out what's what."

"I won't pan tomorrow. I'll wash and press my suit. I'll do a shirt for you, too."

"Thank you, ma'am, and I'd like to make a prophecy."

"What prophecy?"

"Tomorrow night at dinner I'll tell Walt about our trip. And I'm betting he's going to make one hell of a fuss."

Ralph was right. At the idea of their going to town and taking the bottle to the assayer Walt raised one hell of a fuss.

"Danged fools! Wanta upset the apple cart afore it even gets started? We're runnin' into rich ore. You show it to that assay feller, he's a leaky mouth, he'll have it all over town and we'll have a mob up here. What do you want to run a test on the stuff for? I'm tellin' you what it's worth. Maybe I'm off a dollar, two dollars. No more."

"But just to get an official figure, and how'll the assayer know where the stuff comes from?"

"How'll he know! Ain't but one place round here for pay dirt like that. He'll know, and they'll be up here like a pack of yappin' dogs, scratchin' and rootin' around."

"You've taken stuff to the assay before, haven't you? Did that start any mob coming here?"

"Never took him anything rich like this. Seems like you folks ain't *trustin'* me. Just as soon as I see that smoke signal I'll get a grubstake from Mrs. Beach. We'll have our quicksilver and make our amalgam right here. . . ."

"That's another thing, Walt, are you sure there's a Mrs. Beach?"

"Course I'm sure. Think I'm makin' her up?"

"Well, she's pretty fantastic. And neither of us can see the barn."

"Can I help it if you two got poor eyesight?" He sat there frowning into his plate. And then he said, "All right, you come along with me. Ain't no Mrs. Beach! I'll show you!"

They followed him into his quarters and through the old pantry and into another room which had evidently been used for storing supplies. He lifted up a trap door in the floor. "Come on down. And watch out for that last step."

Ralph looked at Leila. "Do you suppose he has the body down there?"

"Maybe we shouldn't go down. It might be some kind of a trap"

"If it is, you and I can lick him. Come on."

So Ralph went down the steps with Leila behind him. When their eyes got used to the dim light they saw they were in nothing more menacing than a cellar, a cellar filled with shelves, and the shelves were filled with jars and glasses of fruit, jellies and vegetables.

"Mrs. Beach," said Walt dramatically. "She made 'em all." He pointed with his finger. "Peaches, apricots, pears, crabapples, green tomato relish, plum jelly, quince jelly, apricot and pineapple mixed, and that's got almonds in it, too, canned string beans, canned peas, canned limas. . . . You see, I got a good little stock."

"I see that, all right," Ralph said.

"All homemade. Sure, I haven't been dishin' it out. Ain't been samplin' it myself, neither. Not till I see that smoke signal and know I'm gettin' a new supply."

"Walt, I apologise."

"Should apologise. Okay. Now I'll let you taste some of her cookin', the apricot and pineapple mixed, that's the best of the lot."

The fruit was ambrosial. They finished the jar and smacked their lips.

"Mrs. Beach," said Ralph, "makes damned good preserves."

"Damned right," agreed Walt. "And you'd never know it by lookin' at her. She just don't *look* like a cookin' lady."

"Well, how does she look?"

"From behind you'd whistle at her. She's got that kinda shape. But in front she's got a face that's got more wrinkles than an old bloodhound. Dyes her hair, gold, and it don't look bad neither. And big blue eyes and all her own teeth. She oughta put on a little weight, she'd look better. But she's hell-bent to stay skinny."

"But how did she happen to come *here*?"

"Come here? She's always been here. It was her old man . . . No, I ain't going to tell you no more. She'll want to tell you herself."

"Well," said Ralph to Leila when they were back in the saloon, "Mrs. Beach may still be a phantom but *somebody* made him a big batch of food."

"And it's homemade, all right," Leila agreed. "You can always tell."

"Nothing phony about the fruit, but I'm still sceptical about this black sand. He was too leary of our showing it to the assayer."

"I think you're right."

"I guess we wait and see. And for tomorrow I make another prophecy: We're going to find a lot of gold tomorrow. To encourage us."

"I'll watch him carefully. If he salts, as you call it, I'll know it."

"He'd be too smart for you. He wouldn't have to put the gold in the pan anyway. He could throw it on the

pile you're panning from. One of these days we *are* going into Bigfield and get that test run. And yet, suppose it's as he says, that we're just about to run into something good, and the assay fellow does talk, and we do get a lot of people up here . . ."

"Let's wait and see what happens tomorrow, whether we find a lot of gold or not."

6

When Ralph and Leila came to breakfast, the coffee was on the fire but there was no sign of Walt. However, on the ground, held down by a rock, was a note.

"Gone to Mrs. Beach's," Walt wrote. "Help yourself to fruit. We'll have more. If you see another smoke signal, that means she wants you to come to dinner. Here's how to get there." And he had drawn a very careful map showing the way across country from Pearl to the home of Mrs. Beach.

"Well, for the love of Mike!" gasped Ralph. "And there's the smoke signal right now." He pointed across the valley. Sure enough, reaching up into the sky was a dark spiral of smoke.

"So she's a *real* person?"

"That's *real* smoke anyway, and, by golly, I *can* see the roof of that barn. Right beyond those trees just as Walt said."

"I see it, too," said Leila. "Why couldn't we see it before?"

"I don't know. Maybe it was too hazy before. But let's go down to the cellar and get some fruit."

So, they had themselves a sumptuous breakfast and

after they'd finished and washed up, Ralph said, "Now I want you to be my partner in some skulduggery."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we're going to poke around until we find that bottle of gold Walt showed us the first day. I want to see if there's as much gold in it as there was before. If there isn't we'll know he's been salting."

"I don't think that's fair! It's snooping."

"That's right. And, girly, just watch me snoop!"

And so in spite of Leila's protests he went into Walt's room and started hunting for the bottle of gold. After a while he found it, hidden behind some other bottles at the back of the cupboard.

"Well?" he demanded, holding it up for Leila to see. "There's not half what there was before. He's been using this gold to put in the pans and make us think the dirt is so all-fired rich."

Leila took the bottle and looked at it closely. "It *does* seem a lot less." She handed it back to him.

"And here's something else that's mighty interesting." He reached into the cupboard and brought out a large bottle which was nearly full of some heavy, silvery stuff.

"But what's that?"

"Mercury. Quicksilver. And remember the old buzzard saying he had 'fary a speck of it'?"

"He told us a lie!"

"*Lies*, Leila. Make it plural. I'm afraid the old codger's told us *lies* and *lies* and *lies*."

"But why?"

"Well, for some reason he wants to keep me digging up there. Keep me . . ." He stopped and laughed. "Leila, I think I have the answer. See if this doesn't make sense. Ordinarily he digs and packs what he's dug down to the water. Right?"

"Yes, of course."

"But if he had water up there at his diggings, he wouldn't have to carry the stuff down to the wash."

"That's right."

"Two or three times a year he says they have floods, big ones, with water rushing down the canyons. Now wouldn't it be just dandy if he had a reservoir right there where he's doing his digging, and when the floods came he'd trap the water and have it for his panning? So that's what I'm digging for him, a reservoir."

"I believe you're right."

"I *am* right. The old buzzard!"

"Let's pack up and leave."

"Not just yet. Let's wait and see what he's up to. For a few days anyhow. And I'd like to meet that fabulous Mrs. Beach."

"Are we going to pan today?"

"Sure, let's pan. And I'll make you a bet we don't find *any* gold at *all*. Of course, Walt could have thrown some on the heap before he left."

"I'll go get a jar of fruit for lunch."

"Take *two* jars, and that pickled relish, and anything else down there that looks good."

With a canvas sack well filled with food, their two miners' pans and the black kettle, they were just about to start down to the wash when Ralph suddenly stared at the road and pointed. "Leila, do you see what I see?"

"It's two cars!"

"It's a car and a truck. Somebody else must have lost his way."

"They'll never get across that bad place. Oh, please stop!" she cried out as if the strangers could hear her. Then she turned and clutched Ralph, hiding her face against his shoulder.

"It's all right," he said after a minute. "They made it."

The cars manœuvred a hairpin turn and were lost to sight for a while, then they came puffing over the hill and stopped directly in front of Ralph and Leila. The first car was a dilapidated old sedan and behind it was an even more dilapidated canvas-covered truck. From these vehicles stepped four people. A woman and what seemed to be a child remained sitting in the first car.

At first Ralph thought he was seeing double. The two men looked exactly alike and so did the girls. They were, he realized after a moment, two sets of twins. They were practically naked and of tremendous size. The men had on shorts and sandals and the girls had on shorts and halters and high-heeled shoes. The men were about six feet three or four, and the girls seemed at least seven feet.

Actually, as he found out later, they were six feet one, but their high heels and the pompadour style of their blonde hair made them seem seven feet. The girls were extraordinarily beautiful, a couple of goddesses, and the men were handsome, too. One of them, though, had an enormous stomach that sagged over his belt. The other was as trim and beautifully built as a young athlete, although by his face Ralph knew he must be in his forties. The girls looked about twenty.

"How do you do?" Ralph greeted them.

"My God!" said the man with the elegant figure, "we nearly went over the cliff. The whole side of the mountain fell away behind us."

"You shouldn't have tried to go over that slide," Ralph told them. "You're darn lucky you made it."

"Somebody's car didn't. It's laying down there in the canyon."

"Mine," said Ralph laconically.

"Brother, *you're* lucky!"

"We were looking for the town of Pearl," interrupted the man with the stomach.

"This is Pearl. You mean you *meant* to come here?"

"But what's happened to it?" asked the man. "I was here twenty years ago. It was quite a little town then, getting down at the heels, but still on its feet, and the cheapest place to live I ever saw. What the Sam Hill's become of it?"

"Twenty years ago they were still working a little ore. When they stopped that, everybody moved away. Or so I understand from the oldest living inhabitant."

"Somebody else live here?"

"An old man by the name of Walt Stauffer. But right now he's away visiting a lady friend."

"You been here long?"

"A week."

"Find any?" asked the fat man sharply.

"Well . . ." began Leila.

"We don't know," Ralph put in quickly.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Hmmm. Seems like you oughta know whether you found gold or not."

"I know, you'd think so. But we don't know. Not yet, anyway."

Leila said, "It's really rather complicated and . . ."

"Take too long to explain right now," Ralph finished for her, his hand on her arm.

"Hmmm," said the man again. "You got the right to keep your affairs to yourself, of course."

"Yes."

"And we got the right to look about to see what we can find. No law against that, is there?"

"None whatsoever."

"Rollo," said the other man, "don't go getting any more wild ideas." And then to Ralph, "How do we get out of this dump? Any other road?"

"Afraid not."

At this there was a little moan from the woman in the car. She opened the door and stepped out. She was a small, dark woman with a worn, vivacious face. She had on a skirt and a blouse, and in contrast to the others she looked almost over-dressed.

"You and your schemes," she cried to the man called Rollo. "And now we're stuck here!" She turned and demanded of Ralph, "Isn't there really any other road out of this awful place?"

"No, there isn't."

"Oh," she wailed, putting her hand to her mouth, while the 'child' in the car leaned out the window and said in a surprisingly heavy voice, "For crying out loud!"

"Don't worry, Mother," said one of the big blonde twins, "we've been in pickles before. We'll fix the road. What's a ton or so of rocks to us?" The two girls drew themselves up proudly.

Ralph stared at them and thought what big, beautiful creatures they were. Venus de Milos with arms.

"I see," said the man with the elegant figure, "that you are admiring my daughters' pulchritude."

"They are something to be admired!"

"Look all you want to," the man said graciously. "There's no charge."

"Well, thank you." It seemed the only thing to say.

"You should see them," the father went on proudly, "without any clothes on at all." As Ralph's jaw dropped, he continued, "Believe me that's somethin'! Two goddesses, my two big beauties." He smiled at them affectionately and his daughters smiled back sweetly at him.

Then he turned back to Ralph and took a pose. "I, too, am something to look at. Am I not?"

"You certainly are, sir," Ralph told him, regaining his tongue. "You're a fine figure of a man."

"Thank you." He bowed, and then looked distastefully at his brother. "Rollo, too, once had a figure like mine, but he liked to eat."

"Eating is very pleasant," the plump man cut in. "Each to his taste. Ha-ha, that's good."

"In our business, my daughters' and mine," said the man with the figure, "we got to be beautiful."

"What is your business?"

"Don't you recognize us? We're the Pilchers." He pointed to the truck. Faded letters spelled out the words: "The Posing Pilchers."

Ralph shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Guess you don't go to carnivals much. We're the Posing Pilchers, living statues. We're real famous!"

"I can never quite get used to it," the small dark woman said to Ralph and Leila, "my family standing up there *naked*! Or at least practically naked."

"You should be proud," said the man, "that your husband and daughters are built so people will pay good money to look at them. Not everybody gets paid for being nude. Of course in some towns the blue noses make us put on tights and a couple of times the girls had to wear bloomers. Think of that, those great big beauties wrapped up in bloomers. It was a crime!"

"I agree with you, sir," Ralph said enthusiastically.

"Our act is educational and cultural. People learn about art. Mother shouldn't be ashamed."

"I'm not *ashamed*. I just said I couldn't get *used* to it."

"Mother is on the *prim* side," he observed, the while

his eyes were surveying Ralph. "But there is something about you . . . Ever done any posing?"

"I was once Baby Stuart in a show called 'Famous Paintings' that Mother's art club put on."

"In the nude?"

"No. I wore a long dress and a little cap tied under my chin. I spoiled the picture. I didn't stand still."

"Standing still takes practice. You *could* do it. You got a nice build. See that even with your clothes *on*. Mind taking them off?"

"I would, rather, right at this moment."

"Well, some other time." His eyes shifted to Leila.

"Now your figure. Well, frankly . . ."

"Father," cried the woman, "just don't you *be* frank. Father is so interested in his work he sees everybody without clothes. And when he's frank, he's not always polite. Having a figure isn't everything. I *know*."

"The lady's figure is all *right*, just not the kind people would pay to see nude."

"After all," his wife broke in, "we've both got young-looking, handsome husbands. I say it's living with us that keeps them that way. So don't let your feelings get hurt."

"He's not my husband."

There was a moment of silence and then the woman turned to her brother-in-law. "Well, Rollo, this is another of your ideas that didn't pan out."

"I was thinking of Sally."

"Sally, Sally, always Sally! Sally is pregnant," the woman explained. "Rollo wanted a nice quiet place for her."

"Well, I *love* Sally," Rollo defended himself.

"You should. She *supports* you."

"And Sally's babies may support me, too. They may be as smart as she is."

"You don't know about the father," his brother observed.

"He was smart enough to be there when my back was turned."

This was, Ralph thought, an extraordinary way of talking. He eyed the twins covertly, wondering which one was Sally. Neither looked pregnant. The woman caught his glance and suddenly she threw back her head and laughed loudly and explosively.

"I'm always surprised at Mother," said her husband. "For a gal with such a little belly she has the biggest belly laugh. Well, what's so funny?"

Still laughing, the woman pointed at Ralph. "He . . . he . . . thinks one of the girls is Sally."

This made all the Pilchers laugh and the woman said, "The girls are named Suzie May and Donaldine. You tell them apart by the eyebrow. Suzie May's right eyebrow has a cowlick in it. Show him, Suzie May."

"See," said Suzie May, leaning forward and putting her head close to Ralph's. Sure enough, in the middle of the eyebrow he could see where the hair grew in a little whirl. Before she drew away she opened her eyes wide and gazed into his with a look that jolted him. It was the kind of look . . . well, it made him uncomfortable.

Her father noticed the look, too, and said, "Whoa, Suzie May, none of that!"

"That's another way the girls are different, too," Mrs. Pilcher said. "Suzie May likes men. Donaldine, well, she likes them all right, but not in the same way. And now you'd better meet Sally. Go get her, Rollo."

Rollo reached into the back seat of the car and brought out a little black dog. "This is my lady love," he said, "and she makes the nut just as often as the others.

'Making the nut,' " he explained, " means making expenses. Sally does mighty well, she earns a lot of money. She's a prodigy, a dog Einstein. I'll show you." He put her on the ground. Sally immediately stood up on her hind legs.

"Excuse the way she looks. She's lost her figure of course. Now, Sally, there are some new people here. Tell them, 'How do you do.' Go ahead, say, 'How do you do.' "

Sally licked his hand and then gave a half yelp and half whine that was a fair imitation of "How do you do."

Rollo picked her up in his arms. "She can say a lot of things. She has a real big vocabulary. But right now in her condition I don't want to tire her more." He put the little dog back in the car.

"Sally should meet Emily," Ralph said. "Emily is a burro up here. She can shake hands."

"Your burro?"

"No, she belongs to the old prospector." Then he was sorry he'd said the word.

"Prospector," echoed Rollo. "If there's a prospector then there must be something to prospect *for*."

"Well, maybe."

"You see," said Rollo, "we are now at liberty and will be for a couple of months until our new outfit starts out from Houston. So it seemed a good time to hold up in a cheap town to take a rest and let Sally have her pups."

"Rollo told us about Pearl," his brother went on. "And he said there was a restaurant here. That's where I thought we'd pick up a little money. Although I am an artist, I am also a very good cook."

"He is," his wife praised, "much better than me."

"And," the father continued, "the girls could wait on table. They always get good tips. And Mindy," he nodded at the little fellow in the car, "he can always make himself a few dollars at something or another."

Mindy leaned out of the window and shook his head. "Not in this joint, I couldn't."

"No, mebbe not. Well," he sighed, "we'd better go back to Bigfield and see what we can find there. But it didn't look none too prosperous when we passed through."

"We can't go there," said Rollo, "until we fix the road. I suggest that before we leave this metropolis we investigate the possibilities of finding gold. No objections, I assume."

"No objections," said Ralph. And then he saw something that made him seize Leila's arm and point to the sky. Black smoke was spiralling up across the valley.

"If you ain't no dog in the manger," said Rollo, "how about telling us where to look for this yellow metal, and also how to use that equipment?"

"I wouldn't mind but we've just been invited out for dinner."

"What?"

"We've just been issued a formal invitation to dine out. This minute. So we'll have to leave you. Come on, Leila. We mustn't keep our hostess waiting."

He took her arm. "Make yourselves at home," he advised the Pilchers. "We'll be back later."

As Ralph and Leila went down the trail, he looked back over his shoulder. The Pilchers were all staring after them and Rollo, his finger to his forehead, was moving it in a circle.

"They think we're crazy, Leila. And maybe they're right."

7

Mrs. Beach's house was amazing.

Ralph and Leila came over the last rise and there it was, a miniature Swiss chalet with high-pitched roof and all the gingerbread, completely incongruous in its setting, the more so because of its adobe outbuildings and surrounding hedge of prickly-pear cactus.

"I see it," Ralph said, "but I don't believe it."

"I don't believe it either."

"All it needs are the Alps behind it and someone yodelling."

It was equally unbelievable inside. Elegantly Victorian, crammed full of heavy plush furniture, blackamoor statues, laden what-nots and the like.

Mrs. Beach was just as Walt had described her: Tiny, with an exquisite figure, well displayed in a tight-fitting gown—by Worth, no less, as she quickly informed them—Mrs. Beach had bright gold hair, bright blue eyes, beautiful teeth, obviously her own, and a face which was a ruin of criss-cross wrinkles and sagging tissues.

"I'm glad you came," she told them. "I thought Walt was making you up."

"We thought he was making *you* up."

"Just shows the old rascal tells the truth *sometimes*."

"Now, Edie, when did I ever put anything over on you?"

"Never. Because I always caught you first." She turned back to Ralph and Leila. "Walt says you're not married."

"No," said Ralph, "we aren't."

"It's your own business, of course."

"We're not married," Leila told her firmly. "We merely happen to be sharing a common living-room, the old saloon. That's all there is to it."

"Young folks sure is different now," Walt observed. "You and me, Edie, shacked up together like that when we was young, we'd of had ourselves a romance."

Leila looked at the old man severely. "What you don't understand, Mr. Stauffer, is that Mr. Bayless and I have no romantic interest in each other. None, whatever."

"Sure's a pity."

"The lady speaks for herself," Ralph put in. "I can *always* feel romantic."

To this Leila announced coldly, "That is one of the things Mr. Bayless feels called upon to say. He doesn't mean a word of it."

Mrs. Beach's bright old eyes flicked from Ralph to Leila and back to Ralph again. "Oh, he means it, all right. He's the type. If I were only fifty years younger, he'd make me feel romantic, he would indeed."

Ralph bowed low and kissed her hand. "Dear lady, you restore my self-confidence."

"Well!" gasped Mrs. Beach, staring at her hand. "That's the first time that's ever happened to me. And I *like* it." She gazed up at Ralph admiringly. "Young man, I'll restore your self-confidence still more. I'm betting that . . . No, I'll keep my old mouth shut. I won't say it out loud, but I'm betting just the same. Now go over there and sit down. You're giving my old heart the flutters."

Ralph sat down obediently and she continued, "All right, let's get to the matter in hand. Walt tells me he's got you hunting gold up there. Finding any?"

"Walt says we are." He bore down hard on the "says."

Leila took it up. "He *says* we've found about \$45 worth already. That's fifteen dollars a piece, quite a nice sum when you consider there are no expenses. He *says* we're going to find that much every week and possibly more."

"At any rate," Ralph went on, "he has me digging quite an excavation for him up in one of the gulches. When the rains come he's going to have a handy pool for saving water."

Mrs. Beach gave a snorting laugh and looked at Walt. "They're wise to you."

"But there's gold up there, Edie, and you know it."

"There *was* gold. Papa got it. And he got it *all*." She turned to Ralph. "If you'd known my father, you'd know that anything he left behind wasn't worth scratching for. Chicken feed!"

"Well, by crackey," Walt told her, "I'll find me that mother lode yet. Your dad got millions, but he didn't get it all. And how about shellin' out a little grub-stake?"

"Father said it was finished; so it's finished."

"Okay, Edie. But one of these days I'll *show* you."

"How do you like Pearl?" Mrs. Beach asked Ralph.

"I've been in places I liked more."

"I haven't gone over there in years. I used to live in Pearl as a little girl."

"There's not much of it left now."

"Too bad. And one of these days they'll put up a sign showing where it was. The Historical Monuments Committee! Damn silly committee. Damn silly woman running it." There was unexpected venom in her voice as she repeated, "Damn silly woman, I say. Wait until a place falls down before she'd put up a sign saying, 'Here it was.'" Abruptly Mrs. Beach changed the

subject and asked, "How much money have you two got? How much more do you need to get where you're going?"

"Well," Ralph answered, "we've got forty-three dollars."

"And two wrist watches," Leila added, "and our share of the gold . . . whatever it's worth."

"Whatever it's worth," Mrs. Beach repeated. "Well," she stated, "I'll give you each a hundred dollars. You can get on your horses and go where you were going. To California, wasn't it?"

"Why that's very kind of you," Ralph began, while Leila said, "What reason could you have to give us all that money?"

"A perfectly good reason. As long as you're up there Walt won't be lonesome. I want him good and lonesome! Then he comes to see me when I send for him."

"Now, Edie . . ."

"Three years ago when that old tramp was up there you neglected me shamefully. With these two young people around I'll *never* get you over here." She turned to Ralph and Leila. "I want you to vamoose, understand." She chuckled deep in her chest. "You're interfering with my love life."

Leila said slowly, "Even if we go, there'll still be people in Pearl. We've had visitors."

"What do you mean?" Walt asked.

"We haven't had a chance to tell you," Ralph said "but Pearl's population has increased by six. The Pilchers. Living statues. They pose in the nude."

"You kiddin'?" Walt demanded.

"It's true." Briefly he described the newcomers.

"More bad news for me," mourned Mrs. Beach. "I won't see Walt now, any time! I'll have to pay these

latest arrivals to leave, too." She counted on her fingers. "Six of them. And the two of you. Eight that makes. That's going to cost me real money. I'll have to do some figuring."

She walked across the room and pulled a velvet rope. Immediately, as if he had been listening at the keyhole, a tall man appeared, dressed in an elaborate wine-coloured uniform. He had an odd face, hard featured, secretive, and without lifting his lid he gave the impression that he saw everything in the room.

"Nibs," said Mrs. Beach, "bring in the drinks and tell Maggie to start the steaks."

As the door closed behind him Walt said, "You got him real fancy this time."

"I'll be a long time dead, Walt. If it pleases me to have Nibs dressed like that, then I'm going to have him dressed like that. Lord knows I pay him enough."

"Sure, why not? Dress him in feathers if you like."

"I might, at that. I have a trunk full of old ostrich plumes." She said to Ralph and Leila, "My son, Hubert, wants me to give up this house and go live in town in an apartment. But when I leave here they'll carry me out, feet first."

"Don't you ever get lonely?" Leila asked.

"When Hubert is here, I'm *lonely*. He's my own son, but such a *boré*. Sometimes I think they switched babies on me in the hospital. Then Hubert won't let Walt come on the place. Hubert is afraid Walt will marry me for my money."

Walt said, "If I was married to you Hubert couldn't run me off."

"No, and I couldn't run you off either. I had a hard enough time getting rid of Hubert's father. I had to pay him alimony until he died."

"Wasn't it cheap at the price?" Walt demanded.

"Yes, it was worth it. He was a double-dyed old . . . No, we're in polite society. I won't say *what* he was. But I didn't even want to keep his name. I made the courts give me back my own. Hubert is just like his father, I'm afraid. A stuffed shirt if ever there was one. And how it would annoy him if I married this old desert rat here! But I'm never going to give another man a legal claim on me. No, sirree! Yet there's no reason for Walt to live up there in that ghost town when he could live down here with me."

"I ain't movin' in unless it's legal," Walt said. "You're a nice woman, Edie, but you're changeable. If it wasn't legal you'd get into one of your tempers and kick me out. So that's the only way I'll come, legal, your husband."

"Stubborn old coot!"

Now Nibs appeared wheeling a tea table loaded with bottles, glasses and a pail of ice cubes.

"I've got a good cellar," Mrs. Beach remarked smugly. "Name your posion, Miss Page."

"I don't drink, thank you."

"No drinking either! What a girl! Mr. Bayless?"

"Bourbon on the rocks."

"No ice for me," Walt ordered. "Takes up too much room. And put mine in a big glass, and fill 'er to the brim."

The man served the drinks to Ralph and Walt and then Mrs. Beach said sharply and emphatically, "Brandy for me, Nibs. Brandy!"

As if he hadn't heard her, Nibs poured out a glass of water and took it over to her. She received it with a gesture of annoyance and then said philosophically, "Well, once he forgot." She lifted up the glass. "To the

new Pearlies—that's what we used to call them—all eight of them, and speed them on their way. Even if I have to pay the bill."

The bourbon was excellent. Ralph downed his drink and thought, I can do with several of these. He had half stretched out his glass in the direction of Nibs, when that character stoppered his bottles and pushed the tea wagon out of the room.

Mrs. Beach looked after him ruefully. "Sorry, my dears, but it seems to be a one-drink night."

"Thought so," said Walt. "I could tell just by lookin' at him that there wasn't goin' to be no seconds. Shoulda warned you," he apologized to Ralph. "With Nibs you always have the first one plenty big, 'cause maybe that first one's goin' to be the last one. Anyways I always do a little sharifi'."

He went over to the mantelpiece and picked up a little China bowl. "You heard the joke about drinkin' out of the sugar bowl? Now you watch Edie do it." He emptied half his drink into the bowl and handed it to Mrs. Beach.

She raised it to her lips. "Now," she said happily, "I can join the party. My doctor's crazy, you know I always feel *better* after a drink."

The dinner was ambrosial and was served skilfully by the ubiquitous Nibs, who, even when his presence wasn't demanded at the table, hovered over them listening to every word.

Tall candles in huge candelabra threw soft light on the "lovely loot"—that was what Mrs. Beach called it—on the Dresden china, the sterling silver, the embroidered linen that Papa had brought back from Europe.

"In his old age Papa got fancy," Mrs. Beach told

them. "I'm glad he did. I never would have bought this stuff myself but now I'm glad to have it."

Over the sideboard hung a large oil painting of Papa, dressed in his rough miner's clothes, his pick and shovel at his feet. In the background the artist had painted two large golden gates encrusted with pearls, and in the sky above them an angel was flying.

The gates and angel were symbolic. For when Papa had announced his intention of hunting for gold in the Indian country, his friends had warned, "You won't find gold over there, you'll find the Pearly Gates, and you'll go through them without your hair."

But instead Papa made his fabulous strike and he called the mine the Pearly Gates. The town that mushroomed up around the mine took the same name; afterwards it was shortened to Pearl.

Papa took a mint of gold out of the Pearly Gates and most of it he hung on to. But during the last years of his life Papa got senile. "Towards the end," Mrs. Beach admitted, "he just wasn't all *there*. Marrying that young girl!" For Papa and his daughter had gone to Europe and Papa had fallen in love with a Swiss barmaid and married her. It was for his little Swiss that Papa had bought the Swiss chalet. He'd had it torn down, stone by stone, board by board, and shipped home in packing cases.

"It took a whole freight train to bring it to Bigfield," Mrs. Beach told her guests proudly, "and then it was carted over here in wagons."

No doubt about it, Papa did things in the grand style. But he didn't live to enjoy his chalet. The house had barely been put together again when Papa got a stroke and within a few days he was dead.

"Poor Papa," mourned Mrs. Beach. "You see, Walt, what happens when men marry in their old age."

"Danged fool thing for him to marry a young girl," said Walt. "If he'd picked on a woman his own age he might be alive today."

"He might, at that. *His* father lived to be ninety-seven."

"What became of the Swiss wife?" Leila asked.

"I made a deal with her and she went back to Switzerland. She was glad for a cash settlement. Poor Papa," she said again.

"Why 'Poor Papa?'" Ralph asked gently. "He probably thought it was worth it. If I were an old man with a lot of money and wanted to spend it for a beautiful barmaid, I don't see why I shouldn't."

Leila looked at him seriously. "Would you like to be married for your money?"

"Oh, I'd probably be conceited enough even in my old age to think I was a mighty charming guy."

"Papa still was," Mrs. Beach said emphatically. "Right up to the end he was a most attractive man. And I think that girl really loved him. It wasn't just the money that he had. Because she didn't make any fuss about the settlement. She could have got a lot more if she'd wanted to fight." Mrs. Beach leaned over and patted Ralph's cheek. "Your charms will endure, too. No matter how old you are, you'll still have the ladies getting gooseflesh over you."

"My pal." Ralph thanked her, and kissed her hand again. "But I hope I have money, too. Then I'll be surer about the gooseflesh. It would be mighty nice if we *did* find some gold at Pearl."

"Young man, you're dreaming! But some actors make big money. Why shouldn't you? With your looks."

"I've got the looks, all right," Ralph agreed modestly, "and I think I can act as well as a lot of people, but so

far I haven't made any big splash. Maybe it's because I don't project."

"Project? What does that mean?" Mrs. Beach asked him.

"The indefinable something that puts your personality across the footlights. I'm afraid I haven't got it."

"Oh, yes, you have," the old lady insisted.

"I hope you're right."

"And you," Mrs. Beach said to Leila, "what's your ambition? That is, until the right man comes along."

"I want to be a C.P.A., a Certified Public Accountant. You take a state examination. It means you can keep anybody's books."

"I imagine your book-keeping will be the household accounts. Some man will come along you won't be able to resist, although how can you resist this one."

Slowly Leila shook her head and said, "I'm not counting on any man."

"I think," said Ralph, "maybe in your youth you were scared by a M-A-N."

An odd frightened look swept over Leila's face and Ralph thought, My Lord, I've hit the nail on the head.

"We'll have coffee in the living-room," Mrs. Beach announced.

Again Nibs wheeled in the tea wagon, this time bearing a silver coffee service. The little cups were silver, too. Nibs served everyone but Mrs. Beach who said coffee kept her awake.

"Not *this* coffee," Walt scolded her. "This wouldn't keep a baby awake!"

"I'm looking after your health, Walt. Strong coffee's bad for you."

"My health," grumbled Walt. "This dish water'll poison me."

Mrs. Beach was staring at Leila and suddenly she began to laugh.

"Think of something funny, Edie?"

"Yes, and the joke's on you, Walt." She stood up. "Come on, my dears, she signalled Ralph and Leila. "No, not you, Walt. You stay here. Maybe Nibs will give you some brandy. Now, if you two young people will just come with me."

"Where you takin' them?"

"On a Cook's tour, Walt. I'm going to show them the house. We'll start in the cellar," she said. "With Papa's centipedes."

8

A moon as big as a wagon wheel hung in the sky. It was easy to see the trail. Walt walked ahead leading Emily, who bore on her back all kinds of food, presents from Mrs. Beach. Next, at a little distance, came Leila, and then Ralph.

Walt said over his shoulder, "You two better get a move on."

"Don't wait for us, Walt," Ralph called. "We'll make it all right at our own pace."

"Well, don't get lost."

"Not with that spotlight up in the sky."

"Okay. Emily's wantin' to get home and get rid of this pack. Got a big haul this time. Stuff here for you, too. And somethin' special I snatched when Nibs wasn't lookin'. I'll dump it at your place. Well, so long then. Me and Emily'll mosey along. Anyhow, guess you two'd like to chew over Edie's proposition."

"You think she means it?"

"Sure she means it. Ain't a bad deal neither. But in the long run you'd do better with me."

"Your idea is that I should keep on digging that hole for you?"

"Well, there *is* gold there. Maybe not as much as . . . well, maybe not a *lot* of gold. But when I got a place to hold the water . . . I mean when *we* got a place to hold the water . . . we can do our pannin' up there, not have to pack dirt, and we'll make ourselves some money."

"When do the rains come?"

"Rains come when they come. How do I know?"

"When do they usually come?"

"Winter," Walt admitted reluctantly. "December, January."

"I see."

"Winter's not so far off. And you was going to get free board and room. And you never can tell when a rain comes you don't expect like that big whopper you got into when you first come. But if you ain't aimin' to dig, then you ain't aimin' to dig. Go throw in with Mrs. Beach. She's got the dough. But she's livin' in the past. *Me*, I live in the future."

"Sometimes, Walt, the past can *be* the future."

"That don't make sense to me. Want to chew it finer?"

"Have to chew on it myself for a while. I'll let you know later."

Walt slapped Emily on the rump. "Get goin', gal." The two of them disappeared around a turn in the trail.

Leila asked, "Is there a lot more to dig to make him the kind of a hole he wants?"

"Oh, not so much. Why?"

"Well, let's finish it for him. I'll come and help. And maybe with the Pilchers digging too, we could get the

place deep enough for him in a couple of days. After all he *has* been feeding us."

"Don't be such a softy. Besides are you going to sit there and not say a word while he gives the Pilchers that gold routine, and salts their pans to make them think they're getting rich?"

"No. I'll tell them the truth, that he wants a reservoir made for water for future panning, and that it would be an act of kindness for us to do it."

"You be kind if you like, not *me*! From now on I do my digging in the past. And for Mrs. Beach." Suddenly he stretched out his arms and laughed. "Look at this desert, this emptiness! Of all places for you and me to be offered jobs!"

"And good jobs, too, with a lot of money."

"It's not a *lot* of money, but as you'd say, it's all profit."

"No, this time there'll be deductions, but just the same \$200 a month for each of us is a nice sum. We can certainly save."

"*If* we get it. Suppose the old girl's bats. *Suppose* she's bats! She *is* bats. So maybe we'll work for a month and not get our money. How can we make her pay in advance?"

"I don't think she'll do that, but she might put our salaries in escrow."

"What's that?"

"She puts the money in the bank and when we've done our work the bank pays us."

"Leila, you know all the answers."

"I think it would be interesting work."

"Maybe . . . Anyway a lot more interesting than me digging that rock and you swishing that pan."

"I don't know why you didn't say 'Yes' right away. Why did you tell her you wanted to think it over?"

"Leila, I've got an idea, but I'm not ready to talk about it yet." He suddenly laughed out loud. "What a combination: the Pilchers and Mrs. Beach! Think they'll get along?"

"Is that part of your idea, that they're going to meet?"

"They might. And Sally and Emily may meet, too. I hope they get along. And I'm also counting a lot on those centipedes and tarantulas, and especially the Gila monsters."

"Ugh! Those horrible things. I'm not going to like that part of the job."

"Scaredy-cat, they're all dead and pickled. And what a waste of good alcohol. And who would have thought that whole menagerie was right under our feet."

For when Mrs. Beach had led them downstairs into a deep cellar which ran under her whole house, there was revealed the most amazing collection of things imaginable. So close together there was scarcely room to walk between them, stretched wooden shelves from the cellar's cement paving to the floorboards of the house. On the shelves was everything under the sun. As Mrs. Beach told them, "Papa liked to collect things."

In glass jars filled with alcohol were not only Papa's centipedes, but Papa's tarantulas and Papa's scorpions and Papa's Gila monsters and Papa's horned toads—one of them two-headed—and Papa's rattlesnakes and various other desert fauna, poisonous and non-poisonous. Mrs. Beach pointed them out proudly and related anecdotes of their capture. The two-headed horned toad, for instance, had been picked up right outside the mine entrance.

For a long time Papa had kept him for a pet. He used to enter him in the horned-toad races which were quite a feature of Pearl's sporting life. That toad made Papa a

lot of money. But then he got old and began to come in behind the others, even with his two heads. So, Papa decided it was time to pickle him.

Papa had had a flair for archaeology and had dug a lot in the Indian ruins. There were shelves of Indian arrowheads, and Indian pottery, whole and in pieces, hundreds of stone axes, innumerable *metates* and *mānos*—grinding stones and hand stones—baskets of all shapes and sizes, and, wrapped in a feather blanket, a whole Indian skeleton grinning ghoulishly.

Papa liked birds and must have had a good taxidermist in his employ. The birds, beautifully mounted, took up a large section of the cellar and there were not only the birds but a collection of their nests and eggs. In another place were the rodents, the packrats, gophers, kangaroo rats, and other small animals of the region. There were even the larger animals, jackrabbits, coyotes, skunks, desert foxes.

Not neglecting the flora, Papa had collected various plants and grasses and framed them between pieces of glass. He had also had an artist paint pictures of different kinds of cactus and other desert growth. If Papa had lived, Mrs. Beach told them, he would have built a gallery in which to hang these pictures. And not only these, but the old masters he had brought back from Europe.

Papa had an enormous mineral collection, specimens from his mine and from all over the country. Particularly beautiful were the pieces of gold-bearing quartz. "If I ever go broke," Mrs. Beach had said, "I can always get gold out of these."

Papa had subscribed to a lot of newspapers and saved every one of them. There they were on the shelves and one of these days Mrs. Beach was going to get them bound. Papa had been a camera bug. His thousands of

pictures were stacked in boxes waiting to be pasted into albums.

Papa had also liked music and according to Mrs. Beach, played about every instrument there was. Anyway there was Papa's fiddle and Papa's banjo, and Papa's occarina and Papa's harmonica and Papa's accordion and still in quite good order, Papa's little organ. Mrs. Beach could play the instruments too. She and Papa used to have duets together. She sat down at the organ and played for them "She's Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage," singing a few phrases in a sweet, cracked voice.

Before they left the cellar Mrs. Beach led Ralph and Leila up to two large draped objects and, after blowing her nose and wiping her eyes, pulled a rope lifting up the coverings. There in white marble, larger than life, were figures of Papa and his wife, Trudi.

"Those figures were supposed to be put on their graves," Mrs. Beach explained to them, "but there aren't any graves."

She had told them how the honeymooners, after seeing Genoa and its famous cemetery with the life-sized statues, had decided that they, too, would have statues on their graves. Papa had ordered the figures made by a very famous sculptor. He had planned a double grave right by the mine shaft at Pearl.

But then Papa got his stroke and the day before he died he told Trudi he'd changed his mind, he didn't want to be buried, he wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered. And that's what Trudi did. When the statues came, several months after Papa's death, Mrs. Beach had written Trudi asking if she wanted her statue sent to Switzerland—and Mrs. Beach would have paid the shipping charges, too—but Trudi had answered that she would have no need for her statue as she too planned to

be cremated and to have her ashes spread over the Alps.

"Maybe she's already spread," Mrs. Beach observed. "I haven't heard from her in years."

Now the old lady dropped the coverings down over the marbles and led Ralph and Leila upstairs where they went from room to room, and then up into the attic. It was the same there as in the basement. With the exception of the living- and dining-room and Mrs. Beach's and Hubert's bedrooms, every bit of space was stuffed with Papa's belongings and collections.

The oil paintings were in the attic, and were mostly of nudes, and plumpish nudes at that, for Papa liked his ladies solid. They were all Old Masters, Mrs. Beach told them proudly, and the biggest canvas was a genuine Rubens and the next biggest a Titian. Papa had been assured of this by the expert in Rome who had sold him the pictures.

The attic also housed Father's office furniture, the swivel chair he'd sat in, his rolled-top desk, the letter press, the filing cases filled with correspondence, the round poker table from the inner office where he and his cronies had played for those fabulous stakes.

At one time Papa had made a gift to Pearl's saloon of fifty brass spittoons. When the saloon closed for the last time the proprietor had given them back to Mrs. Beach and they were neatly stacked under the eaves. Papa had also presented the saloon with some faro and roulette tables, and these, too, had come back to Mrs. Beach.

The bedrooms below were overflowing with the old furniture from the original home in Pearl, ornate and heavy pieces of black walnut, the bureaux and tables topped with grey marble, and in spite of, the rooms'

elaborate bathrooms, Papa had preserved the crockery items from the days before plumbing.

And Papa's clothes! Papa had owned quite a wardrobe. His suits and coats, emitting the odour of moth-balls, hung from racks that took up not only the closet but the room itself. In the bureau drawers were his underwear, his socks, handkerchiefs, jewellery. Shelves had been put in the bathroom to hold his hats, shoes, canes, gloves.

Trudi's clothes were in another room. Father had dressed her like a queen, but when she departed for Switzerland, she took practically none of her dresses with her.

In the room Mrs. Beach called the "album-room," were several large tables and on them were boxes of Papa's keepsakes and mementoes, which Mrs. Beach intended to sort and paste into scrapbooks some day. "Memory books," she told them, "the story of Papa's whole life." She showed Ralph and Leila the little white envelope with his golden baby hair in it, and the card with his first tooth pasted on it, and a note written by his First Grade teacher, and his first arithmetic paper with 4 and 3 added up to 8 and marked "incorrect." There were childhood snapshots, a diploma from the eighth grade, and so on and so on, right up to the last grey curl Mrs. Beach had cut from Papa's hair after he died.

Mrs. Beach wept a few tears in the album-room and then led the young couple into the upstairs hall and the tour of the amazing house was over. They went down to the parlour where Walt sat with his glass of brandy.

"You showed 'em everything, Edie?"

"Everything."

"You got too much danged stuff."

"That's what Hubert says."

"Hubert's right, for once. Get rid of it. Pack it up and ship it down to the museum."

"And let Venice get her paws on it! Never!"

"Okay, okay. Don't you go gettin' excited."

"That woman!" Mrs. Beach snorted, her nostrils flaring. "Let her have Papa's things! Let her decide what she'll take and what she'll dump! And 'dump' was the very word she used. Venice had her chance. She'll never get a thing that ever belonged to Papa. Not one thing!" She pounded the table with her fist.

"Don't break up the furniture, Edie. And say, if you mosey over and get that sugar bowl, you'll find something in it you'll like."

Mrs. Beach flew to the mantelpiece, picked up the bowl and buried her nose in it.

"And there," Walt told Ralph, pointing to a little hollow angel on a what-not, "is your dividend. I'da got more for you but Nibs was watchin' too close."

"Well," said Mrs. Beach, wiping her mouth with her lace handkerchief, "that hit the spot. Now I'll tell you about Venice."

And she went on to relate the reason for her feud with "that woman" who now ran the Bigfield Historical Museum. It was unfortunate that when Mrs. Beach had offered Papa's effects and collections to the Bigfield Museum—which Mrs. Beach had promised to enlarge and fireproof—Venice had been president of the museum's board. She had persuaded the other members that Papa's things could not be accepted "in toto."

"In toto," snorted Mrs. Beach. "Venice always liked that high-falutin' language. She said a lot of what I was giving was junk and should be discarded and that she—the nerve of her—would decide what was to be

dumped and what not dumped. And she *dared* to say that Papa's statue was an atrocity and should never stand in front of the museum. She didn't even want to change the name to the Beach Museum. She said the Bigfield Museum was plenty good enough. Bigfield Museum! If it hadn't been for Papa there never would have been a Bigfield!

"She said Papa's oil paintings were lewd," Mrs. Beach went on, "that if they were hung on the walls and children saw them, it would seduce their morals." She demanded of Ralph. "If you were a child and saw those pictures, would your morals be seduced?"

"Not mine."

"What about you?" she asked Leila.

"Well . . ."

"Stupid woman!" Mrs. Beach continued without waiting for Leila's answer. "Venice will rue the day she insulted me and Papa!" She rose, walked across the room and carefully placed the bowl back on the mantelpiece. Then turning back to Ralph and Leila she told them about her *plan*.

Papa would still have his museum, right here in his own home, his statue would stand on a pedestal in front of the chalet, the chalet would be left not to Bigfield but to the state, maybe even to the *nation*. It would become a monument like Yellowstone Park or Mt. Rainier. And Ralph and Leila were to help her do it. They were to put the collection in order—catalogue, label, paste, do everything that needed to be done. She would pay them good salaries and they could move in with her.

Mrs. Beach was in the midst of outlining their duties when Nibs reappeared with his usual air of eavesdropping and said Emily was now loaded with the things Mrs. Beach was sending to Pearl.

Mrs. Beach, looking at Nibs defiantly, said to them, "Well, my dears, my proposition stands. Is it 'Yes' or 'No'?"

"We'll think it over," Ralph said quickly before Leila could answer, "and let you know. As you were talking I had several ideas."

"Don't have too many of them. I like to have the ideas."

"These ideas, I think, will please you."

"You'll be hearing from me," she said as she went to the doorway with them. "Watch for my smoke."

The moon was still high when Ralph and Leila got back to Pearl. They could see the Pilchers' tents pitched near their trucks. Quietly they went by them and on into the saloon where Ralph built a quick fire in the stove. On the floor was the large sack that Walt had left.

"We seem to share in the loot, too," Ralph said as he examined the sack's contents. Mrs. Beach had sent them several jars of fruit, some potted meats, boxes of crackers and cookies, a pound of tea, a box of candles, and at the very bottom, a lipstick.

"Now that was nice of her," Leila said. "She remembered my saying I was going to buy one in Bigfield."

"And a whole box of candles. Let's light one and burn it as long as we like."

"I wonder what that something special was Walt said he got for you."

"I think I know," Ralph chuckled. He picked up a cracker box and shook it in Leila's ear. "Listen!"

"It gurgles!"

"Gurgles is right." He pulled open the flap and inside was a pint of bourbon.

"Good old Walt! That took some manoeuvring, I'll bet. Let's have ourselves a night cap."

"I'd rather have tea."

"Okay, the water'll be boiling soon. We should have asked the old girl for a teapot."

"We'll have to put the tea into the kettle instead of the other way round. It's absolutely the wrong way to make tea."

"Put some whiskey in the tea and you won't know the difference."

"That would spoil the tea. You have some tea in your drink."

"And spoil my whiskey? No, ma'am!"

When the water boiled Leila put in the tea leaves and swished the kettle around. After a little steeping, she poured the tea into her cup, being careful to hold back the leaves.

Ralph poured out his whiskey. "Good bourbon," he approved after the first swallow.

"The tea is good, too, even made like this." Leila sipped it with satisfaction. "This is just like those nights with my aunt."

"Leila, it's a *little* different, isn't it?"

"Well, at my aunt's we had sugar and lemon."

"Sugar and lemon! What a girl I have for a roommate!" He held out his cup. "Don't you want a swallow?"

"No, thank you."

"Think of it as a toddy, to help you sleep."

"I never have any trouble sleeping. I'm a very good sleeper. Oh," she said suddenly, putting down her cup and reaching for the lipstick which Ralph had placed in the muffin tin, "I wonder what colour my lipstick is. I can't wear every shade." She held the lipstick close to the flame of the candle.

“‘Hot Stuff.’ That doesn’t tell me anything.”

“Put some on and see. Here, I’ll do it for you. I’m used to make-up.” Setting down his drink he took her chin in his hand and deftly applied the lipstick. “It’s a good colour for you and a big improvement. You should pencil your eyebrows, too. Wait a minute . . .”

He opened the stove door, fished out a half-burned twig, and when the flame was out and it had cooled, he drew it along her brows. “You have no idea what that does to you. Your face needs accents. I’ll show you.” He took the candle and went into his room and came back with his shaving mirror.

Leila stared at herself. “It does make a difference, doesn’t it?”

He stared at her thinking: Actually she is a very pretty girl and I could make her fall in love with me. And why am I being so damn noble, anyway?

“Did you ever see the ‘Voice of the Turtle?’” he asked abruptly.

“No.”

“Thought you might have. It ran for a long time in New York and road shows have been all over the country. In it a young man spends a night in the apartment of a young woman. The circumstances are made very plausible. It was raining and he didn’t have a hotel reservation. So he had the davenport in the living-room and she was in her bedroom. That was the end of the first act. So then the next night it was still raining—or was it. I can’t remember—and he did have a reservation at the hotel. But anyway they decided that since the davenport was still there, and it was late, that, well, he’d spend another night in the girl’s apartment . . .”

“Well, did he?”

“He started to take off his coat and then he put it on

again and started to walk out the door. He said to himself, 'This is all too damn silly.' "

"Well?" demanded Leila, when Ralph didn't go on.

"I'm just thinking that I thoroughly agree with that young man. This is all too damn silly."

"What happened in the play?" she asked.

"Oh, the girl called him back, and that night they were both in the bedroom. That was the end of the second act."

"It sounds like a very immoral play."

"Yes, it was."

"What happened in the third act?"

"Oh, they had breakfast together and he said he thought he wanted to marry her."

"*Thought* he wanted to marry her!"

"That was the New York version. The version I saw out of town had it that he actually did want to marry her. But in New York it was left vague. Big city sophistication."

Leila sat there staring at Ralph, her brows drawn together. "I don't like this conversation."

"Well, then, let's end it." He got up and pulled her to her feet. "Good night, Leila."

"Good night, Ralph."

His hands still on her arms, tightened, and drew her to him. He put his lips to hers.

He was amazed at the violence with which she tore away from him. "How dare you?" she cried. "How dare you?"

"How dare you?" he mocked. "Leila, how quaint can you be?"

"To take advantage of the situation like that?"

"You get *quainter* and *quainter*."

She paused at the door of her room. "I forgive you because you *are* under the influence of liquor."

He strode over to her. "Jumping Jupiter, Leila, I haven't even finished that first drink. I'm *not* under the influence of liquor."

Without answering, she closed the door in his face. There was a scrunch and a thump as she moved the heavy chest in front of it.

"Leila, that was *not* necessary. I don't break down doors. For your information," he added, "I've never had to."

There was only silence from within. He went back to the stove, finished his drink, picked up the bottle and took it into his room. He undressed and got into bed. He had every intention of lying there and having himself several good drinks, enough to make him drunk. But the walk from the chalet had tired him out. So as soon as his head touched his pillow he fell asleep.

Toward morning he stirred and had a dream. In this dream Mrs. Beach had brought Papa's statue over to Pearl and she and Mr. Pilcher were having an argument about it. Mrs. Beach said Papa was all right the way he was, but Mr. Pilcher said he'd look a whole lot better if she brought in a sculptor to chisel off his clothes.

9

Ralph was up and dressed before Leila the next morning. He sat outside on the sagging steps and waited for her, looking down into the beautiful valley, feeling fit and fine, and glad he'd been too sleepy the night before to polish off the bottle.

He heard her coming out of her room and then she was through the swinging doors and standing beside him.

Gazing up at her he saw that she had on her lipstick and looked surprisingly pretty.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank me for what?"

"For last night, for forgiving the old lecher."

"I want to be just. I'm afraid I encouraged you," she told him seriously.

"My dear girl, *how*?"

"Well . . . letting you put lipstick on me and fix my eyebrows."

"Oh, Leila, you take life too seriously. Shall we see what's cooking, if anything, for breakfast?"

Walt's al fresco dining-room had been completely transformed. The Pilchers had come well equipped and there was a long table set up, covered with a real tablecloth, and there were folding chairs for everyone. A small table held a gasoline camp stove and cooking utensils.

While her husband fried the bacon, Mrs. Pilcher was stirring the scrambled eggs. Walt was tending his biscuits in the Pilchers' Dutch oven. The beautiful twins, wearing no more clothes than the day before, were setting the table. Mindy was pouring tomato juice from a big can into the glasses. Only Uncle Rollo was inactive. He, with Sally on his lap, was already seated at the table.

"We're eatin' high, wide and handsome this mornin'," Walt sang out. "Come and get it."

It was a good breakfast. Sitting in a real chair and having a handle to his cup had certain advantages Ralph decided. Everyone ate like a pig, except Uncle Rollo, who ate like two pigs. He had a special plate for Sally who took her food with surprising daintiness but had an enormous lot of it.

"Excuse her appetite," he apologized for her, "but she has to eat for five or six or seven."

On either side of Ralph were the twins. From time to time the luscious Suzie May leaned against him cosily and gave him her heavy-lidded, provocative smile. Well, well, he thought, what you won't find in a ghost town! Aloud he said to her, "Would you pass me the salt, please?"

She passed it with such solicitude, with such a mooning look in her beautiful eyes that her mother said sharply, "Suzie May, you can give the man the salt, but you don't have to climb in his lap. Suzie May *likes* men!" she announced to them all.

"She shows good taste," Ralph defended her.

"But it's so . . . so *concentrated* in Suzie May. If only Donaldine had some of it."

"Don't you like men?" Ralph asked the twin on his other side.

"Oh, yes," she answered sweetly. "In a calm sort of way."

"Har-rumph," Walt cleared his throat. "Everybody got enough? Everybody got a full stomach? I got some-*thin'* I want to talk about and things listen better on a full stomach." Being assured that everybody's stomachs were full, he began, "You see, it's thisaway . . ."

And he told the Pilchers about the reservoir he wanted dug and the chances of finding gold when it was dug.

Clever old codger, thought Ralph. He's making a good story. He's got them eating right out of his hand.

"There's lots of diggin'," Walt admitted, "and I ain't got nothin' to pay you with but promises. Next winter when the water comes and I do my pannin', I can send you your share of the gold I find. Maybe it's nothin', maybe it's a little, maybe it's a lot. Sort of an unusual proposition, ain't it?"

"Not at all, not at all. Show business is built on such

propositions," said Mr. Pilcher. "*We're* always looking for angels. But it's a new proposition when someone wants the Pilchers to be angels. That is unusual."

"Huh?" said Walt. "Don't get you."

"An angel is somebody who puts money in a show hoping he'll get it back and more, too. You're not asking us for money,—and that's lucky—you're asking us for muscles. Cash is low, muscle is high. Even Rollo, fat as he is, could still dig."•

"Me, too," said Mindy in his heavy voice.

"Now, my little man," said Walt, "that's real nice of you, but I couldn't work no child. Bad enough to have women diggin' for me."

"Child!" snorted the "little man", reaching into his pocket and getting out a cigar, which he lighted defiantly, and drew in a great breath.

Walt stared at him and then said to Mrs. Pilcher, "Ain't that bad for him, that tobacco?"

Mrs. Pilcher laughed and asked, "How old do you think he is?"

"'Bout six."

"Add twenty," said the "child".

"He's a midget," explained Mrs. Pilcher.

"I'm *not* a midget," Mindy stormed angrily. "I've told you and told you. A midget is misshapen. I'm a lilliputian, a perfect miniature man. That's why they call me Mindy."

"I'm sorry, Mindy. I won't forget any more."

"I'm little, but I can *work*. I worked during the war, putting rivets in the tails of planes, where it was too tight a squeeze for the big lunks. If there's digging to be done, I'll dig, too."

Uncle Rollo now spoke up. "I always consider Sally in any situation and I believe it would be good for her

to stay in Pearl and have her babies. As you know, she gets car sick even when she isn't pregnant. So if we stay here rent free, and board free, with this kind gentleman, then why not do a little digging for him? Seems only neighbourly. However—" he patted his stomach, "I like to eat. The board is an important item in this transaction. I want to be sure the board will be forthcoming. You tell us, sir, that in an emergency we could live off the country. The idea of eating quail fed on wheat soaked in whiskey appeals to me, the idea of eating a pack rat does not."

"Rollo, be quiet!" Mrs. Pilcher cried. "*I think*," she said firmly, "the first digging we should do is on that road. We should fix it so that if we have to get out in a hurry we can. Suppose some of us get sick."

"Well, now," said Walt, "you all look pretty healthy, and although it ain't the rainy season, you can never tell about the weather. Maybe a big rain comes along and we ain't got our hole dug."

"Agreed," said Rollo, "the rain comes, *maybe*. But there's no maybe about Sally. She's having babies, positively. She may need a vet. The road will have to be fixed so that we can take her to town in a hurry. I ask you, my dear sir, wouldn't you want the road fixed if Emily were in the same condition as Sally?"

"Well, now, I don't know. Subject's never come up. Emily's an old maid."

"While Sally is about to produce heirs and heiresses. We must do the road first."

So for all of that day and the morning of the next Pearl's entire population laboured on repairing the road. Ralph had given warning that he and Leila would have to leave if Mrs. Beach summoned them. Every few minutes he scanned the sky. But no smoke signal appeared. "I

guess," he told Leila, "it was just an old lady talking through her hat. That means goodbye to my big idea."

At last, with the aid of brush and timbers and rocks, and by digging deep into the side of the mountain, the road was passable. To be really sure that Sally would have transportation in an emergency, Rollo drove the Chevie across the new piece of road and parked it in a wide place further down.

"Had a dog once," said Walt, "a lady dog, and she was always having pups. She had 'em just fine; it never worried me none."

"But," said Rollo, "that dog wasn't supporting you, was she?"

"Nope. Never had no dog support *me*!"

"When a dog's your meal ticket, that's different!"

"Yep, 'spose so."

"Do you think," Ralph asked suddenly, "that Emily and Sally might become friends and do an act together? I mean could Sally jump on Emily's back and ride around on her?"

"I don't see why not," said Rollo. "Emily's a smart little donkey and of course Sally is brilliant."

"Huh," said Walt, "Emily's as smart as Sally; I just never had no time to train her."

"I doubt that Emily could say, 'How do you do.'"

"Bet she could, if I put my mind to it." Walt's voice was angry.

Mr. Pilcher came in soothingly with, "Do you think you and Emily would like carnival life, Walt? A donkey's a pretty big animal to carry around in a truck."

"Me and Emily would *not* like carnival life."

"How do you know until you've tried it?" Uncle Rollo asked. "Sally nopes on it."

"I hope you ain't plannin' on me and Emily joinin' your outfit, because we ain't. Me and Emily, we ain't stage struck. And how in blazes did this all come up anyhow?"

"I brought it up," said Ralph. "I was just wondering if Sally and Emily could do an act together. Can't a guy wonder?"

"Sure, but there don't seem much point to it. And now," Walt grumbled, "since we got this here road all fixed and the car across it all ready to rush Sally to the dog doctor, if she needs a dog doctor, let's go and do a little diggin' up in my canyon."

"We'll dig all afternoon for you," said Mr. Pilcher pleasantly.

But Walt wasn't listening. He was staring down into the valley. "Company's comin'," he said. "This place is sure gettin' popular." After a minute he cried, "Gosh all Moses! It's Mrs. Beach's big old Packard! Mrs. Beach is comin' to see us!"

The car crept towards them and stopped in the wide place beside the Chevvie.

"Hello," said Mrs. Beach, nodding her be-feathered hat at them, while Nibs at the wheel stared ahead impassively. "I never thought I'd get here. The road *has* gone to pot."

Walt had stepped up on the running-board and was staring at what Mrs. Beach held so carefully on her lap.

"Edie," he cried joyfully, "you're a sweetheart! A little, old double-barrelled sweetheart!"

"Thought you'd like it," said Mrs. Beach, handing out the box to him ever so carefully, and Walt took it from her just the same way. "Now put it down for a minute," she commanded, "and make me acquainted with your friends."

When the introductions were over Ralph put his head in the car's window and said, "Lady, am I glad to see you! I'm busting to tell you the Big Idea!"

"Boom!" came from the other side of the mountain. And again, "Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Mrs. Beach looked up from the grave, which she had been gazing at in a rather melancholy fashion, and smiled happily at Ralph and Leila and Nibs. "Walt is having fun, isn't he? I should have given him that dynamite long ago. But the more dynamite I give him the less he wants to come to see me."

"I told you," said Ralph, "you should move to Pearl."

"I'm too old to rough it."

"If you had a trailer . . ."

"Well, maybe." She looked down at the grave again. "I'd like to fix up this cemetery though. I'd like to begin right here. The old headboards used to be interesting. All gone now. But they said, 'Mike Keenan, hanged.' 'Bill Roberts, murdered.' 'Davis Cline, hanged.' 'Marty Oates, natural causes.' And this one, right here, is where young Sam Bottsford is buried, I'm almost sure, and his headboard said, 'Hanged by mistake.'"

"Oh," said Leila, "that was *too* bad."

"No, it wasn't, he *should* have been hanged. He killed several men. But this murder he was supposed to have done, never took place. They found the man was still alive. Anyway the thing to do is to get new headboards made, but make them so they look old, and tidy up the place a little."

Leila said, "I shouldn't imagine people would like to look at a cemetery just to see where a lot of bad men are buried."

"Yes, my dear, they would. And some place around here we must put up pictures of the people with their histories typed underneath. I must have the pictures. They can be covered with glass so they won't get rained on." She turned and stared up at the top of the hill. "Pearl's not quite gone," she said. "There's enough left to save."

"There is," Ralph agreed, "more than enough."

"The thing that bothers me is: Why did the idea have to come from you, a stranger? Why didn't *I* think of it?"

"But you *did* think of it. You gave me the idea."

"How?"

"When you were talking about the Bigfield Historical Society and how they'd be fools enough to wait until a place fell down before they'd put up a marker to show where it had gone."

Mrs. Beach's old face lit up with a smile. "Why, yes, so I did."

"Your idea all the time. You threw the ball and I caught it."

"So much better to have Papa's monument here instead of at the chalet."

"This is where it all started," Ralph stated. "This is where he found the Pearly Gates."

"All Papa's things displayed the right way," she said with satisfaction.

"We'll have to advertise. Along the highway have signs. Like those 'Free Zoo' signs. Only we won't be free; we'll charge admission. 'See Pearl, a live ghost town.' 'Come to Pearl, where the past is the present.'"

"I'll set up the books," Leila offered.

"Now, Leila, it's a little early to start thinking about bookkeeping," Ralph protested.

"Oh, no, it isn't. If you're going to charge admission,

then there's a government amusement tax. You'll have to keep track of what you take in. And if we sell anything, there'll be a sales tax, and if we hire anybody, there's withholding tax, and social security and . . ."

"Okay, okay, you can keep the books. And think," he went on to Mrs. Beach, "of the cheesecake we've got all ready and waiting. Those twins. Dress them in can-can costumes and take pictures. Just the thing *Life* will pick up. And we've got animals, Emily and Sally. And maybe we can sell liquor. . . ."

"You'll have to get a liquor licence," Leila put in.

"Then we'll *get* a licence. And that old theatre, if we can put it in shape, and give plays like 'The Drunkard.' And of course the museum will have all of your father's wonderful collections," he put in quickly, seeing the old lady's attention wander.

"We must get a fireproof building," Mrs. Beach insisted.

"The old post-office is made of stone."

"Yes, that would be a good place. But what about water? That was always a problem. Sometimes we had to haul it."

"Can't we haul it again?" asked Ralph. "Anyway the cistern's full now."

"Rest rooms," said Leila suddenly. "All those people will mean rest rooms."

"Leila, do you always have to be a gloomy Gus?"

"I'm not a gloomy Gus, but I like to expect the worst and then prepare for it. And I think a worst would be a lot of people up here wanting rest rooms and no rest rooms."

"My dear," said Mrs. Beach, "we'll solve that problem. People got along before there *were* rest rooms."

"There must be plumbers in Bigfield," Ralph said,

"and all kinds of people there who'd be willing to help. Get them pepped up with a slogan. 'It's Your Pearl.' What about that?"

Mrs. Beach shook her head violently. "It'll be pearls before pigs if you're counting on Bigfield. They're dead on their feet."

"The Chamber of Commerce . . .?"

"Dead, too. Leave Bigfield out of it. I don't want Venice putting in her two cents' worth. Ha," Mrs. Beach gloated, "this will be curtains for Venice. We'll take the trade right away from her two-bit shack."

"The first thing the visitors will see," said Ralph, "will be the graveyard and your father's statue. We'll have someone here to sell little pamphlets, a history of the place, and a map showing where everything is. Then they'll come into town and see Pearl completely restored. Like Williamsburg. What has Williamsburg got that we haven't got?" he demanded.

"All that Rockefeller money," said Leila.

"I've got money, too," Mrs. Beach assured her.

Ralph went on, "It's the road that worries me. People aren't going to come unless it's a good road. That means bulldozers and a road crew. It'll take money to get a first-class road in here."

"Don't think about the money," Mrs. Beach said indifferently. "What we've got to decide now is where to put Papa. Should he be here where they'll see him the first thing as they drive in, or should he be standing at the end where they'll see him last?"

"Last," Ralph said. "He's the climax. Put him up there on that high ground."

Mrs. Beach walked away to the little rise and stood there, her hand on her chest, one foot advanced. Obviously in her mind she was Papa standing there in marble.

Suddenly Ralph felt a poke in his back and he swung around. "Listen, you!" hissed Nibs.

"Are you talking to *me*?"

"To nobody else. Now you listen, and you listen good. The old girl's not going to fix up any road. That's too rich for her blood, so I'm letting you know."

Ralph started at him in amazement. The man's whole attitude had changed.

"Are you her guardian?"

"Buddy, that's me. I work for Hubert, see, and I guard her from phonies. My job's to see she don't get into things too deep. And doing over a road's too deep. She can have fun, fixing over a cemetery, moving her junk up here—and good riddance to it—fixing up a few old buildings. But when it comes to bulldozers and all that stuff for road-making, that's out, complete'y o-u-t, out. And just to let you know where you stand, I've got the key to her safety-deposit box. She can't get into her bonds and securities without *me*. Hubert's fixed that too."

"Hubert's a careful son."

"Sure he's careful. He's . . ."

Mrs. Beach was coming back to them.

"I'm in the driver's seat, remember that," Nibs warned under his breath.

"That's the very place for Papa," Mrs. Beach said brightly. "Right there on that high place like you said."

"On a pedestal," Ralph told her, "and piles of ore around it."

"People will carry away the ore as souvenirs," Leila warned.

"Let them. It'll be good advertising and we've got lots of ore."

"Papa's rocks will be going all over the country," beamed Mrs. Beach.

"All over the world," Ralph predicted. "People will be coming to Pearl from Canada, from Mexico, from Europe."

"Papa's rocks," the old lady said dreamily, "going all over the world. I think," she told them, "I want you two to drive back with me and stay for a few days. We'll talk about this and get it organized. You can leave a note for Walt if he hasn't blown himself up with that dynamite."

"I'd better go get my suit," said Leila. "These clothes are filthy."

"I'll lend you something to put on. I must have some dress that will fit you. And you, too," she said to Ralph. "You can wear one of Papa's suits. Well, will you come?"

Ralph, out of the corner of his eye, watched Nibs. The man was frowning with indecision.

"We'll have fun," Mrs. Beach predicted happily, "deciding what things to move first and where we'll put them."

Suddenly Nibs' face cleared. So that Mrs. Beach couldn't see him, he made a gesture of approval, his thumb and finger meeting in a circle.

"Of course we'll come," said Ralph, "glad to."

"Boom! Boom!" came from over the hill again.

"Walt's getting a big deep hole," said Mrs. Beach merrily. "But I just want to see his face when he hears how we've changed the *plan*."

I O

Mrs. Beach had put Ralph in the room with all of Papa's clothes. He lay soaking in the big marble bathtub, being careful not to splash water on the row of hats so neatly arranged on the shelf above the faucets. He felt luxurious

but slightly guilty. "Bayless," he said to himself, "you are sinking to a new low. You are about to take advantage of an old woman."

And yet, was he? If Mrs. Beach wanted to cart a lot of junk over to Pearl and wanted help in doing so, and was willing to pay for that help, well, why not?

A devoted daughter wished to erect a monument to her father. Was rehabilitating Pearl such a stupid idea after all? Plenty of mourning relatives had paid large sums for piles of rock which did nobody any good. Pearl at least would preserve a piece of Americana, and would give pleasure to the people who came to see it.

But how many were coming unless the road got fixed, and with the watchdog, Nibs, around, what chance did he have of getting the lady's money for *that*? Answer: None. All right, suppose the road was left as it was. A few daring souls might drive over it and Mrs. Beach would get satisfaction from having the monument even if almost no one saw it. Those tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes and Gila monsters might just as well be in some showcase in Pearl as in the chalet. And all those other things too. In his mind's eye he catalogued them and was appalled by the vast conglomeration of objects which would have to be moved.

Walt was right: You didn't *own* things, *things owned you*. Carting over the saloon furniture alone would require a whole truck. The mahogany panelling, the chairs and tables, the pictures, the brass spittoons. Then an unwelcome thought came to him. If the saloon became show place number one, he and Leila would have to move out of it. That would be too bad. He liked living there with her.

And all those photographs of old-time buildings and old-time characters. What a job that was going to be typing up descriptions and biographies! Because Mrs.

Beach was blessed, or afflicted, with total recall, Leila certainly would be pounding out an awful lot of words on that Remington.

It was unfortunate that Mrs. Beach had quarrelled with the chairman of the board of the Bigfield Historical Museum, that Venice Smith. The two old girls should co-operate instead of fighting each other. This business of bringing back a ghost town was something a whole community should get behind. He remembered that he'd read an article somewhere about a ghost town in Montana being revived and how every man, woman and child had done his bit for the project.

But Mrs. Beach wanted to do it all on her own. It was her money; and that's the way it was going to be. When she said "Jump!" he and Leila were going to jump. The Pilchers, too, if they were put on the payroll. He wondered if they'd stay in Pearl if they weren't paid a salary.

The road! The road! That was the problem. At least it was now passable. Mrs. Beach's stuff could be got over by truck.

Ralph got out of the tub and dressed. Papa's fifty-year-old suit fitted him fine in the shoulders but nowhere else. There was enough extra pants in front to hold a baby kangaroo, and a big baby kangaroo, at that. Papa had been tall, too, so Ralph had to turn up the cuffs of the trousers to keep them from dragging on the floor. The coat sleeves were so long that the tips of his fingers barely showed. He needed a hair cut as well, but that couldn't be blamed on Papa.

As he went down the hall towards the stairs Leila's door opened and she came out.

He stared at her open-mouthed. "Shades of Lillian Russell!" he gasped. For Leila had, on a low-cut, elaborate ballroom costume of pale-green taffeta.

"I feel terribly naked in it, and it won't even come together in the back. We had to use safety pins. And of course it's too short . . ."

"You look perfectly beautiful. You should always wear your hair in a pompadour."

"Mrs. Beach fixed it for me, and she put on the make-up, too. It's much too heavy."

"A little. But it's becoming."

"I like you in that suit, too."

"I could also do with some safety pins. The pants need a few pleats. Papa had a paunch." Then he held out his arm to her. "Madame, leave us find the chow."

Nibs looked up from his tray of drinks as they came into the parlour and whistled appreciatively. "A couple of swells!"

"Thank you, Nibs," said Ralph, "and I can use one of those drinks right now."

Nibs poured out two cocktails. When Leila refused hers, Nibs said, "Then I'll drink it." He sat down on the settee, looking incongruous in his livery. In livery, Ralph thought, one should stand, never sit.

Nibs tasted the martini critically. "Not bad. If I do say so, I make a good martini. Well, the old girl won't be down for a while. She's putting on the orange sash and that has about a million buttons. Maggie's up there helping her. So we can have a talk." He took another swallow and twirled his glass around.

"Go on and talk," Ralph prodded.

"There was something I didn't tell you when we were over in Pearl."

"Let's have it."

"The old lady's got a lot of dough, but it's all tied up. When she dies it goes to Hubert. I just thought I'd tell you. Nobody's going to be remembered in her will. But nobody."

"Are you trying to say," asked Ralph, "that we might be sticking around hoping the lady would leave us some money?"

"I certainly never thought of such a thing," said Leila, "and I think you're most unkind to suspect us."

Nibs put down his glass. "All kinds of people have tried to get a toehold in this set up. And that's okay. The old lady rates a little fun. But I just want you folks to know the score." He stood up, putting down his glass hastily. "Here she comes now."

Mrs. Beach made her entrance, gorgeous in orange satin, complete with dog collar and a lace fan. "My dears," she cried, "you're beautiful."

"You are the beauty," Ralph said, scrambling to his feet, bowing low over her hand and kissing it.

"Thank you for the lie," she told him, and then plaintively to Nibs, "Do I get a martini tonight?"

Silently he poured out a small portion and handed it to her.

"Stingy," she complained, lifting the glass to her lips. After the first swallow, she announced, "I've been thinking about the road into Pearl. We'll *have* a road."

Ralph watched Nibs stiffen so he hastened to say, "That's too much money for you to gamble. You might not get it back."

"This is a memorial to Papa. I'm not expecting profits. No pockets in my shrouds. We'll *have* our road."

Behind her back Nibs was violently shaking his head.

"However," she continued, "I'm not going to spend my own money but the county's. Although most of that's mine, too, with the taxes I pay. What do you think of the idea of making the county repair that road?"

"How are you going to get the county's money?" asked Ralph, wondering if she were batty.

Mrs. Beach chuckled gleefully. "The Mirandas will get it for me. You don't know about the Mirandas? They're a family who live here on the place. I've been supporting them for years. I have to do it. Old man Miranda did a favour for Papa once, so I'm stuck with them. And the old man, bless his fertile soul, has *thirteen* children. Now do you see how I'm going to get the county's money?"

"No, I don't."

"Seven of those thirteen children go to school. The school bus stops here every morning to pick them up. But if the Mirandas move to Pearl, those kids will still have to go to school and the bus will still have to pick them up, and . . ."

"And the county will have to repair the road so the bus can travel on it," Ralph finished for her.

"Bright boy, you've guessed it. And Morgan's the county seat. I've got friends over there in the highway department. It's not like Bigfield where everybody hates me. We'll get that road and it won't cost us a cent."

"But will the Mirandas be willing to move?" Leila asked.

"They like to eat. So they'll move if I tell them to."

"Not Fernando," Nibs interrupted suddenly. "We need Fernando here."

"Fernando stays here. But he doesn't go to school anyway. He must be at least nineteen."

"Twenty," said Nibs.

"As for the rest of them, they go to Pearl. Pronto. I might as well feed them where it will do me some good. And there are plenty of houses in High Pearl for them to live in."

"But those houses aren't safe," Leila warned.

"Why aren't they safe? The Mirandas can do some patching and repairing if they feel like it. Not that they'll feel like it."

"No, I mean what Walt told us, about it being all tunnelled underneath and the danger of the ground caving in."

"Walt!" Mrs. Beach snorted. "He just wanted you people to live near him. He likes company. That ground has no tunnelling underneath it; it won't cave in."

"Well, then," Ralph said, "that solves the problem of where Leila and I live when we leave the saloon. We'll pick ourselves a house. Or a couple of houses," he added. "I'll miss the old saloon though. It seems like home and ——"

"Now," Mrs. Beach broke in, "let's talk financial matters. . . ."

At the word "financial", Nibs alerted like a bird dog.

"... As I said, I'll give you each two hundred a month."

"That's wonderful," Leila thanked her.

"For how long will the job last?" Ralph asked.

"How can we tell? One month, two months, three months, maybe a lot of months."

"We worked very hard for Walt," Leila began gently, "and then . . ."

"And then you found he was just stringing you along."

"If our first month's salaries could be put in escrow," Leila suggested carefully, "and then when we'd done our work the bank could pay us."

"Why bother about escrow? I'll pay you a month in advance. How does that suit you?"

"That would be wonderful if you feel you can trust us."

"If I didn't, I wouldn't be going into this deal with you."

Ralph was watching Nibs. The man suddenly nodded

his head, and once again gave the gesture with his thumb and finger.

So Nibs approved, thought Ralph. Going to let the old lady have her fun. Well, two hundred wasn't much of a salary but he and Leila could keep most of it.

"That's very generous of you," he said to Mrs. Beach.

"There'll be other things besides the money. You'll be working some of the time over here. Eating meals with me. And I'm going to stock up Walt's larder. And I think we can find some better beds for you and some sheets and blankets. After dinner we'll make a list. Now about the Pilchers? Are they on my payroll, too?"

Nibs firmly shook his head. Thumbs down for the Pilchers.

"Well," said Ralph, thinking fast, "when Pearl is renovated and becomes a Mecca for tourists, the Pilchers can put on their living-statue act, make money that way. Rollo has Sally and whatever she can make. I've even thought of a stunt for Walt. He can rent rides on Emily's back. Rides for the children, I mean. And maybe Rollo can train Emily and Sally to do an act together."

"I don't think," said Mrs. Beach, "that I like the idea of the Pilchers posing without any clothes on. It's not the sort of thing I want taking place at Papa's monument."

"They say their posing is artistic."

"Naked is naked! I'm not going to have it at Pearl. It wouldn't be decent. They can pose, but they'll have to wear *clothes*. Mr. Pilcher can be Billy the Kid with six-shooters. Uncle Rollo can dress himself up as somebody else. Mrs. Pilcher and the girls and that dwarf can put on old-time costumes and be atmosphere."

"I have a feeling," Ralph said, "that if you make the Pilchers wear clothes, they'll want to be paid for it. They don't *like* to wear clothes."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. As far as I'm concerned," and she suddenly giggled, "no nudes is good nudes. Shall we eat?"

From downstairs Mrs. Beach called good night to them and turned off the light. "You put out the upstairs one," she told them. "The switch is right there behind the little angel's bottom."

"We'll do it," Ralph assured her. "Good night to you."

"Good night," she said again, "sleep tight."

At Leila's door they paused and Ralph said, "Well, partner, we seem to have bitten off quite a piece. The question is: Can we chew it?"

"Of course we can."

"There's the matter of that eighth child."

For when Mrs. Beach had telephoned the county school superintendent in Morgan, he had said school bus service to Pearl could be provided only if there were *eight* children needing transportation.

Mrs. Beach hadn't been too bothered by that. She assured them there were plenty of prolific families in the valley. The Mirandas could just borrow a child.

Leila said, "I'm worried about the Pilchers. They are not going to want to put on clothes. I wish she'd pay them a little something."

"Nibs is against it. That character!"

"He's working for the son. He has to do his job."

Ralph looked down at Leila now, thinking to himself: An off-shoulder dress becomes her. She has pretty shoulders.

"I suppose," she said, "we'd better say good night."

"Before we do, may I ask you a personal question?" He leaned towards her a little.

"What is it?" she said warily, drawing away.

"Have you ever done any acrobatic work? Contortions?"

"Of course I haven't. Why do you ask?"

"Well, he grinned, "I was just wondering how you were going to get out of that dress, unpin those safety pins."

"Oh!" she cried, her hands flying behind her.

"You *could* go down and ask Mrs. Beach to do it."

"Yes, I could."

"But it's dark down there. You'll probably stumble over the bric-à-brac and break your leg. And maybe Mrs. Beach is asleep. Of course, you *could* ask me to do it."

"Yes, I could."

"If you didn't think it was encouraging me too much. I'm very easily encouraged."

Her chin went up and her eyes widened. But she turned around and presented her back to him. He quickly undid the pins and as quickly she turned and faced him.

"Thank you," she said, taking the pins from his outstretched hand.

"You're welcome. And as an experienced ladies' back unpinner, may I say you have a pretty one?"

She said nothing but her lips curved in a ghost of a smile. She opened her door and slipped inside. Very quietly he heard the bolt slide across.

Turning off the light he went into his own room. As he flipped the switch he caught a glimpse of himself in the long mirror. What a ridiculous picture he made. But, he felt, something should be added. From the shelves of the bathroom he fetched one of Papa's stove-pipe hats, some gloves and a cane.

"Now you're a regular bloke," he told his reflection, and went into a little tap dance. Very softly he began to sing:

"I'm silk-hat Tony,
I'm broke and I'm stony . . ."

The big bed was soft and the pillow of down. But he couldn't sleep for thinking of the project and its problems. That extra child needed for the school bus was the least of it. How could he and Leila, practically by themselves, revive a ghost town? How *could* they?

He went over the help that might be available. The Pilchers. They might lend a hand and they might not. Walt wasn't strong enough for any heavy work. The Mirandas, except for Fernando, whom he hadn't met, were evidently not worth a damn. Nibs, no doubt, was efficient, but would he be willing? And who else was there?

If only Mrs. Beach weren't so hell-bent to do it all on her own without any help from Bigfield. He could see that with the right kind of persuasion the whole town might get behind the project. You could go to the local unions, get them to contribute labour, to the merchants for materials, to the chamber of commerce for publicity. Publicity! Oh, yes, and he'd better get some pictures taken quick of the beautiful Pilcher twins before Mrs. Beach had that gorgeous cheesecake all wrapped up in sunbonnets and mother hubbards.

The old lady wanted to start with the cemetery. She insisted on that. All right, start with the cemetery, tidy it up, make new headboards for the graves, chisel on the words, and do the job so the boards would look old and weathered. Get the rockpile ready for Papa's statue. Well, they could do the cemetery. That wouldn't be so bad.

Then she wanted to house her precious relics in the old post office. That building was of stone, with a slate roof, fire-proof. But he'd have to get up on the roof and check for leaks. Also all the windows were out and he and Nibs were going to have to put them in—buying

the glass in Morgan, not Bigfield—and neither of them had ever set a window pane before.

One problem seemed to lead to another. When the post office was made safe for the relics and they were on display and visitors pouring in—he hoped the visitors would be pouring in—who was going to watch to see that things weren't stolen? There was Old Man Miranda. According to Mrs. Beach he never did anything but sit. So let him sit and watch!

Ralph twisted restlessly. Oh, well, what was he worrying about? He was inclined to agree with Nibs. Mrs. Beach would probably get tired of the whole thing before the month was up. But at least he and Leila would have their two hundred dollars each. Two hundred dollars! He must keep his mind on that. Like being in a lousy show you know is going to fold but Equity guarantees you two weeks' salary.

If the Pilchets would pitch in, there'd be quite a lot of muscle power. Papa and the girls were huskies. Nothing to be expected from Uncle Rollo. He'd be nursing Sally's pups if they ever arrived. But Mother and Mindy were both willing, and Mindy, small as he was, had done a surprising amount of digging.

But *where* were they going to find that eighth child?

I I

Ralph woke up very early and very hungry. He heard some sounds below. Somebody was evidently up. Maybe he could get some breakfast. He went to the section of the racks where Papa's bathrobes hung and selected one of purple satin. He put it on over Papa's night-shirt.

It swallowed him up and he decided to dispense with Papa's regalia. He got into his own shirt and blue jeans of the day before.

As he went by Leila's door he paused and said softly, "Leila, are you awake?" There was no answer and he padded softly downstairs, stumbling through the dark rooms with their shades still drawn, into the bright light of a modern, streamlined kitchen. Maggie was frying pancakes at the stove and Nibs and a dark young man were seated at the kitchen table.

"Good morning," said Ralph. "My nose told me where to go. I hope I'm not interfering with any early-morning routine, but I could certainly use some breakfast."

"The food's here," said Nibs laconically, "and this is Fernando."

"*Buenos dias*," the young man grinned.

"I'll fix you a tray," Maggie said, "and you can take it into the dining-room."

"Don't bother about a tray," Ralph told her. "I'll eat right here at the table."

He sat down and Nibs pushed over a pitcher of orange juice and a glass while Maggie set before him a cup of coffee and a plate of pancakes and bacon.

Ralph tucked into it and after a little said, "This kitchen surprises me; it doesn't go with the rest of the house."

"Maggie," Nibs explained. "It's her doing."

Maggie said, "I like old-timey stuff, but not in the kitchen. In the kitchen I want to be new as new."

"I'd like *everything* new as new," Nibs announced. "This living in an old castle is driving me crazy. I'd like to move into town, to a brand-new streamlined apartment. I'd like to get rid of our cows, pigs, chickens and

stop growing fruit and vegetables like we was trying to feed an army."

Fernando wiped his mouth and stood up. He was much shorter than Ralph had thought, not over five feet five or six. "No cows, no pigs, no chickens, no fruits, no vegetables . . . no job for me," he said, and walked out.

"Fernando talks sense," Maggie stated. "And Mrs. Beach would miss putting up all that fruit and stuff. You know how she likes to can." She came over to the table and flourished her pancake-turner at her husband. "I want to ask you something else, too. You move her into a new apartment and get her eating food from the delicatessen and what becomes of *us*?"

"Well, it would be nice to be near a movie and a pool hall."

"And we get streamlined right out of our jobs. And you with your delicate stomach wanting to eat bought food! How are you going to like wilted vegetables and store eggs, and pork from pigs that've been fed on garbage, and cream that you have to *pour* from the pitcher? He doesn't like pour-out cream," she explained to Ralph.

"Doesn't all cream pour?" Ralph asked. He had taken his coffee black.

"Not ours. Look!" She picked up a teaspoon and thrust it into the cream pitcher. The spoon stood straight up. "See what I mean?"

Ralph picked up the spoon and repeated Maggie's thrust. The spoon still stood upright. Then he brought it out with an enormous dollop of cream on it. He stared in wonder. "I see what you mean. Stand-up cream!"

"Stand-up cream," she repeated proudly. "To me cream that you can *pour* just isn't cream. We give our

pouring cream to the pigs. And our extra butter, the pigs get that, too."

"No wonder the pork roast last night tasted super, extra special."

"Our pigs eat better than a lot of folks." And he— she indicated Nibs, "*he* wants to move to town!" She flounced over to the stove and then whirled and added, "You move her into town and she'll die with nothing to do. I'm glad you came," she said to Ralph. "It's good for her to fix up old Pearl. She'll get a new lease on life. I remember the way Pearl used to be. It was a wonderful place!"

Nibs said, "She'll get tired of it. She gets tired of everything, the jigsaw puzzles, crocheting afghans, the shell pictures."

"Puzzles, afghans, shells!" Maggie sputtered. "Niggling little stuff. This is something real, something she can get her teeth into."

"It needs a lot more than her teeth and our teeth," Ralph said. "If we could get some help from Bigfield . . ."

Nibs shook his head. "That's out, finished!"

"What about this Mrs. Smith, the museum woman?"

"Finished, too."

"Any chance of patching things up?" Ralph wanted to know.

"Sure, if Mrs. Smith comes crawling."

"She the crawling type?"

"Nope."

"Problem: How to make a lady crawl."

"How to make the whole town crawl! Mrs. Beach is mad at all of them."

"Those birds," mourned Maggie, "those silly little birds. They caused all the trouble."

"It wasn't the birds, it was those folks choosing the birds instead of Mrs. Beach," Nibs went on to explain. "You see, there's this bench in front of the chamber of commerce office and on the days she went into town Mrs. Beach liked to sit there and wait for me to pick her up. But there's a limb of a tree stretching out over the bench and birds nesting up there in the tree. So the birds . . . well, they act like birds . . . and most every time she sits there these birds do you-know-what on Mrs. Beach's hat. So she says to the chamber of commerce, 'Saw off that limb so it doesn't stretch over the bench and the birds don't nest there and do you-know-what all over my hat.'"

"Reasonable, ain't it?" Maggie demanded.

"But the chamber of commerce ain't reasonable. They hold a meeting—sure, they have to hold a meeting about it—and they tell Mrs. Beach the tree gives shade and they ain't going to cut off the limb. They tell her to sit some other place or else do a little dodging. Between a rich old lady who can do them some good and some little birds that . . . well, they choose the birds."

"Strictly for the birds," said Maggie grimly.

"But couldn't they have moved the bench?" Ralph asked.

"Sure they could have moved the bench, but that would have meant unscrewing a few bolts, a little trouble."

"Strictly for the birds," Maggie repeated.

"They tell Mrs. Beach where to go, she tells them where to go. So now she hates Bigfield and we do all our shopping in Morgan, which is three times as far and besides has stinking movies."

"It's a shame," said Maggie. "She used to like going into Bigfield. They needed her and she needed them."

"I wonder," mused Ralph thoughtfully, "if I could be a dove of peace and fly in there with an olive branch?"

Nibs shook his head. "You'd have to be a mighty big dove carrying a whole olive tree in your teeth."

At this point a bell sounded and a number flashed on the indicator above the icebox.

"The boss's ready for her breakfast," said Maggie. She poured some hot cake butter onto the griddle and put half a dozen strips of bacon in the frying-pan. "Do you think the young lady would like a breakfast tray, too?" she asked.

"I think she would," Ralph answered. "I'll take it to her."

He knocked against Leila's door with his foot.

"Yes," she answered.

"If you'll unbarricade yourself, I have your breakfast."

"But I'm not dressed."

"Well, throw something on."

He heard her padding about the room. Soon the bolt slid back and the door opened a crack. He saw she was in something with blue feathers on it.

She reached for the tray. "Thank you. I'll take it."

But he pushed in past her, lifting the tray over her head. "My word! Miss Ostrich herself. Fancy Trudi leaving that behind."

"You can put the tray right here on this little table."

"Oh, be luxurious and have it in bed."

Pulling the be-plumed robe even closer around her, Leila slid under the covers. He gave her the tray.

"It was very kind of you to bring it up, I suppose you've had your breakfast already." There was dismissal in her voice.

"Yes, wasn't it kind of me? And I have had my breakfast, thank you. But you observe the two cups. I'll have some coffee with you." After he'd poured out her coffee

he poured a cup for himself. Then he pulled an easy chair up to the bed and sat down.

"Cosy, isn't it?" he said, leaning back. "But you don't look cosy. Why don't you relax? And why do you try to drink your coffee through that hedge of feathers? After all I know what your neck looks like. I saw it last night."

Suddenly she let her shoulders drop and stopped clutching the robe together at her throat. She leaned back against the pillow. "It's just that I've never . . . I'm not used to . . ."

"To having a man in your room for breakfast. Well, life is full of new experiences." He lifted his cup. "Your health. And now may I ask you a personal question. Have you ever done any sewing?"

"You're always asking personal questions. Can I do acrobatics? Can I do contortions? Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I can sew."

"That's good because I may need some sewing done. In this saga of Pearl it may be necessary for me to play the role of a dove with an olive branch in my beak. Oh, I won't look like a dove. I'll look like an eccentric millionaire. No," he said thoughtfully, helping himself to some bacon, "I don't think I'll be the eccentric millionaire. I think I'll be the eccentric employee of the eccentric millionaire. And for that I'll need some sewing. I'll need more than that. I'll need a secretary. That will be you. You'll be my secretary and you'll carry a briefcase and say, 'Yes, sir,' 'No, sir,' 'Very good, sir.' But first I'll need some sewing. Well," he said, reaching for more bacon, "aren't you going to ask me any questions?"

She stared at him and shook her head. "If you want to tell me, you'll tell me."

"What an extraordinary woman!" he remarked, getting to his feet. "Curiosity under complete control. 'Well, I'll leave you now and go see if Mrs. Beach has any more ideas for me.'"

He paused at the door. "You look very pretty in blue feathers and I'm glad you can sew."

It was afternoon. Mrs. Beach was taking her nap. Leila was in Ralph's room sitting on the floor, her mouth full of pins. She was turning up the bottoms of Ralph's pants, or rather the bottoms of Papa's pants that Ralph had put on again.

"There," she said, taking the pins out of her mouth. "I think both legs are the same."

Ralph looked in the mirror and pivoted slowly around. "Well, Schiaparelli, what do you think?"

Leila frowned and bit her thumb. "Through the seat . . . they're so . . . so . . ."

"Exactly. So droopy drawers. Papa really went places. Before and . . . behind." He shook his head. "Let the pants down, Leila. We'll have to work from the top."

Leila took out the pins and then stood up and pinned big loops in the braces. The pants now came right under Ralph's armpits.

"They don't hang badly now."

"You *can't* wear them like that."

"Why not? I won't take off my coat. And the coat fits all right." Leila had already pinned up the sleeves and he put it on and struck a stance. "With all due modesty Papa in the chest was a fine figure of a man."

"It looks so old-fashioned."

"But good goods, Leila, good goods."

"Why don't you take some of your cheque"—right after

lunch Mrs. Beach had paid them—"and buy yourself a suit in Bigfield?"

"It wouldn't be smart to buy anything in town. The word would get around. Besides, I couldn't afford the kind of suit I'll need. This outfit, although you may not realize it, is an impressive piece of haberdashery. I don't mind its being dated. It's the kind of a suit that an eccentric employee of an eccentric millionaire would wear."

"I think this idea of yours is perfectly absurd."

"So do I. I think this whole experience is perfectly absurd. But, Leila, you've never done over a ghost town . . ."

"And how many ghost towns have *you* done over?" she flung at him.

"The same number as *you*," he grinned. "But I assure you, it's a big, big job. We're going to need help. Well, that help is all ready and waiting at Bigfield. All that has to happen is for Bigfield to come crawling to Mrs. Beach. And I'm the boy that will make them crawl."

"You're going to go there and tell a lot of lies."

"I'm *not* going to tell lies. I'm just going to let Bigfield assume some things are true that aren't true . . . yet. *Anticipating* is the word, not lying. And now let's decide about my hats. Which one looks best on me, Leila? The stove pipe? The fedora? The derby?"

She watched him as he tried on the three hats and then said, "They are all terrible. The derby is the least terrible."

"The derby it is. Now about your clothes. I think your suit will be all right."

"I don't see why you need me."

"I do need you. A secretary is important. It makes us more of an entourage. You won't have to do anything.

Just be there and say, 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir' and hand me papers out of Papa's little satchel."

"What kind of papers?"

"Oh, just papers?"

"They can't be just papers. There'll have to be something on them, some writing. Well, what kind of writing?"

"I know. We'll sneak up into the attic and get some of those old maps and old photographs. That'll do it."

"I don't like this, I don't like this at all. I feel like a criminal."

"Why? I'll call for an old map. You'll say, 'Yes, sir,' and hand me the map. What's criminal about that? Come on, Leila, we're in this together. Be a sport."

"All right, but I don't like it."

"Okay if you don't like it, just so you *do* it!"

"Anticipating," she said, frowning. "And stealing these clothes . . ."

"*Borrowing* the clothes, Leila. We'll give them back. The old girl will never miss them." Suddenly he took her chin in his hand and turned her face to the mirror. "Look there. I want you to remember just how you look right now."

"Why?"

"Because your expression is exactly the one my secretary should have. Worried and disapproving and suspicious."

127

Except for putting Papa on his pedestal they'd finished the graveyard. They had over fifty neat mounds, some with what Walt called "the departed" under them, and some without departed. To be really honest about

things, Walt had suggested that they ought to bring over some of the skeletons from the cave and bury them under the mounds.

"No," said Ralph, "you leave that cave and its bones as it is. That's going to be one of our prize attractions."

They'd straightened up the old headboards and gone over the lettering with black paint. They'd made new "old" headboards to mark the additional mounds. Also on each headboard, framed in glass, hung a picture and a brief biography of the departed. Leila had done these, typing up the facts from Mrs. Beach's dictation and pasting on the photograph.

"John (One-Ear) Sifton," a headboard would state. "Died of Bullet Wounds." And in the frame would be the picture of a one-eared, bearded man, with typed information about him, including the fact that his ear had been bitten off by his wife.

"She should have bitten off the other one, too," Mrs. Beach told them. "He led her an awful life, chasing women all the time."

They'd built Papa's pedestal of old bricks cemented together, and they'd piled around the base of the pedestal the beautiful pieces of ore retrieved from the mine's dump. Right in front, sloping slightly, they'd managed to make a rectangle of white pebbles. Then with small pieces of bright-green copper ore they'd spelled out Papa's name: Eldred "Pearly" Beach. Mindy had done most of this. His little hands were better at the task than larger ones.

Mrs. Beach was very pleased with the lettering. "I'm glad we used the 'Pearly'," she said. "Papa never liked Eldred. He thought it was sissy."

Now there was just one thing left to do. Bring Papa over. And what a job that was! To get him out of the

cellar, up on the Pilchers' truck, to keep him from falling off as the little truck puffed and panted over that awful road, then to get him down from the truck and up on the pedestal. At one time Ralph thought they wouldn't make it. But Nibs had rigged up some sort of block and tackle, and with everyone—except Uncle Rollo who sat on a mound soothing the still undelivered Sally—pulling, tugging, pushing, lifting, Papa was at last on his pedestal.

Ralph had thought to bring over a camera from Beachcroft and took time out to snap pictures. He concentrated on the straining muscles of the curvaceous twins.

"If this doesn't make *Life*," he muttered under his breath to Leila as he got a shot of the twins apparently propping up Papa unaided, "I'll eat my hat."

And so there stood Papa in his rightful place, gazing over Pearl and the beautiful valley where he had found the fabulous strikes.

"He does look nice," Mrs. Beach said happily. "And now we celebrate. I've been planning that when Papa was on his pedestal we'd have ourselves a party. Nibs!"

From the back of Mrs. Beach's car Nibs brought out a folding table and then he set on it a freezer of ice cream, two big angel-food cakes, a Thermos of coffee, and paper plates, cups and spoons.

"Strawberry ice cream," she told them; "Papa's favourite. And a dozen eggs in each cake."

"My dear lady," Uncle Rollo announced after his first taste, "I have never eaten anything like this."

"There's a reason," Ralph told him: "the cream that stands up."

"M-m-m-m-m," said Uncle Rollo, and gave a portion to Sally. Sally licked her chops, and immediately sat up and begged for more.

"Say, 'Pretty Please,' " her master ordered.

"Pretty Please," whined Sally, and it did indeed sound like "Pretty Please".

"Wouldn't you like to give Emily a sample of this delightful concoction?" Uncle Rollo asked Walt.

Emily, cropping grass nearby, looked up at the sound of her name.

"No, Emily," Walt told her, "you stick to grass. Ice cream would make you fat like . . . I mean," he apologized to Rollo, "I ain't a-min' to get her used to pamperin' I can't keep up."

Mrs. Beach said, "It's cosy here in the graveyard eating ice cream with Papa."

"Eating is always pleasant," Uncle Rollo agreed. "Right, Sally?"

"Right," said Sally, or what sounded like "Right."

Leila now took out a little notebook from her pocket and said to Nibs, "I want to put down how much that black paint cost."

"It didn't cost anything. We had it at the house."

"But it originally cost something; you can still deduct it as an expense."

"I'll have to look it up. I can't remember now."

"And," Leila continued, "we must keep track of the truck mileage and a certain portion of Nibs' salary can be deducted . . ."

"Oh, Leila," Ralph scolded, "stop making noises like a C.P.A. We're having a party."

"But now's the time . . . Oh, all right." She put the notebook back in her pocket.

"I never knew such a girl for wanting to put down figures." He smiled at her lazily but she didn't smile back.

"Speaking of figures," observed Mr. Pilcher, "look at that!"

Suzie May, obviously for Ralph's benefit, had silhouetted herself against the sunset and was stretching languorously.

"Grace itself," said her father. "Donaldine, you stand up there with her."

"Oh, Daddy, there are no cash customers."

"Don't always be thinking of the dollar," he told her, and pulled her to her feet. "We'll all pose. They've never seen us. This," he announced, "is the faun and nymph series. Of course it would be better without clothes."

Even with their clothes on the poses were beautiful and Ralph said to Mrs. Beach, "You see. It is artistic."

"It really is. Well, I don't know . . ."

But then Mr. Pilcher had to go and spoil it. Just as Ralph had dreamed it, he said to Mrs. Beach, "It's too bad your father's wearing clothes. A sculptor, maybe, could take them off."

"The very idea," Mrs. Beach said angrily. "Papa standing there naked! Certainly not!"

Ralph hastily changed the subject. "Have you found that other child? It's time the bull-dozers got busy on this road."

"What about it, Nibs?" Mrs. Beach asked. "There are all kinds of children in the alley."

"Sure, all kinds. But their folks don't want to lend them."

"I don't blame them," said Mrs. Pilcher, "I wouldn't want to lend one of mine."

"But you have only two." These families have from ten to fifteen," Mrs. Beach told her.

Nibs said, "Whether it's the first or the fifteenth, I couldn't make a deal."

"I was so sure we could borrow one. Well, we'll have to keep on looking. We've got to have that eighth child."

Mindy had been listening intently and now took his cigar out of his mouth and asked, "You mean if there aren't eight children at Pearl, the school bus won't come up here and the county won't repair the road?"

"That's the rule of the school board," said Mrs. Beach. "There must be eight children."

Mindy now stood up and beat himself on the chest. "Big people do things, little people do, too. They couldn't have made the bombers except for me riveting in the tails. I helped win the war."

"Why, of course you did, Mindy," said Mrs. Pilcher.

"I couldn't fight," he went on, "but I could get in those tails and rivet. So now there's another emergency. You need a child. So I'm the child. I'm six years old and I have to go to first grade."

"Mindy, cried Mrs. Pilcher, "you're twenty-six years old!"

"I can still go to school."

"And falsify records," said Leila, "say you're *six*, when you're *twenty-six*?"

"Oh, I got that all figured out. When I fill out my card, I'll write down twenty-six, but I'll blot the 'two' so only the 'six' will show. I'm foxy, I am."

"Well, don't be too foxy," Ralph advised. "You can't fill out your own card."

"Why not?"

"Because you're six years old and you don't know how to write."

Mindy grinned sheepishly. "Jeepers, that would have been dumb of me. Sure, I don't know how to write."

"Somebody else will have to do it for you. Your father or your guardian."

"Who wants to be my father? Don't all speak at once."

"I will," said Uncle Rollo.

"No, you're not married. What would that make me?"

"You can join our family," Mr. Pilcher offered. "You can be the little brother of Suzie May and Donaldine."

"That's okay. Hi, sisters!"

"They're going to wonder about your voice," Uncle Rollo warned. "It's so deep."

"M-m-m-m. Well, I'll raise it. Like this." He went into a falsetto.

"It's going to be doggone hard keeping that up all the time," said Mr. Pilcher.

"I won't sound like that all the time. Just when I recite and talk to the teachers." He went into the high register again. "Two times two is four, three times three is nine. C-a-t spells cat." He put his cigar in his mouth again. "It'll be easy," he said in his natural voice.

"But," Walt put in, "somethin' else ain't goin' to be so easy."

"What?"

"Givin' up them cigars."

Mindy's face fell. "You're telling me? Well, plenty of kids have sneaked their smokes. I'll do it, too."

"Mindy, that's very gracious of you," Mrs. Beach praised him. "That's a load off my mind. And now I think our next task should be the post office, putting in the windows. We can start on that tomorrow."

Ralph held up the pane of glass. It was quite a bit smaller than the window it was to fit.

"But I measured it," he said to Nibs, "with your steel tape." (Nibs was helping with the post office glazing while Mrs. Beach was napping on Leila's bed in the saloon.)

"You think," Nibs asked, "that tape could be wrong?"

"I measured the space," Ralph said, "you saw how carefully I measured it. The other one fits perfectly." He looked in puzzled exasperation at the window they had just put in, all neatly puttied, the pane fitting exactly, and now propped up with a stick.

Leila, at another window, stopped pulling out broken pieces of glass with the pliers, and suggested, "Perhaps the frames don't measure the same."

"Leila, you're such a ray of sunshine!" Ralph took out the tape again and did some more measuring on several of the windows.

"They're all *different*," he announced. "Who ever heard of such a thing! Windows in the same building not being the same." He sat down on a rickety three-legged stool and put his head in his hands. "I give up!"

"You can't give up," said Nibs. "You started all this."

Suzie May who had also been pulling out broken glass now came over to them.

"Are all the panes cut wrong?" she asked.

"Some of them are," Ralph told her.

"I've cut my finger," she said, holding it out to him with a gesture that said plainly, "Kiss it, and make it well."

"I've cut mine, too," Ralph replied unfeelingly.

Suzie May made a little face put her finger in her own mouth, and went back to work.

"What a babe!" said Nibs admiringly.

"Babe is right. She's sixteen."

"Sixteen! Looks like we can't win!"

Mindy, who with the Pilchers and Walt, had been knocking broken glass out of other windows, came by carrying a box full of glass splinters to throw out. In his new soprano voice he was saying to himself, "two

times two is four, two times three is six, two times four is eight . . ." He went down into his own register. "Just practising," he explained to them. "I want to know the answers."

"Mindy!" Ralph cried. "Get this through your head. You don't take exams to get in first grade. You're supposed to be dumb, ignorant, a blank page."

"Golly Moses, you're right. I gotta remember to be dumb."

"If you don't they're going to smell a rat."

"You're sure right. I'm dumb, ignorant, a blank page. Well, anyway," he piped, "I hope I get a pretty teacher." He went outside with his box.

Ralph glared after him and said, "This is the quintessence of asininity."

"Come again," Nibs asked.

"This is just plain stupid. In the time that nine of us working like blazes have managed to put in one pane of glass, one man who knew his business could put in nine panes of glass."

"But," said Nibs, "we got the nine of us and we haven't got the one man who knows his business."

"It's so illogical. If Mrs. Beach would spend just a little to hire . . ."

"Pal, our girl friepd isn't logical. That's what you've got to savvy. Sometimes she throws it away, sometimes she pinches the pennies till she has old Abe squealing. A glass cutter and putty are cheap, see. And we got lots of unbroken glass in other windows. So we economize. We take out the unbroken windows, we cut them to the right size . . ."

"Only we don't get the right size," Ralph broke in ruefully. "Nine of us," he went on, "cutting ourselves to pieces getting out glass, cutting ourselves to pieces

putting in glass. And all we have in is one pane. One pane!" He gestured toward it in contempt, and then, as if in protest, the ancient stick holding up the window bent and splintered. The window came down with a crash. The new pane shattered and fell to the floor with a silver tinkling.

Into the complete silence Mindy piped, "Careful what you say! Remember there's a little boy present."

"As . . . I . . . was . . . saying," Ralph gritted through his teeth, "we . . . *had* . . . one . . . pane. We're doing it the hard way."

"You think there's an easy way?" Nibs demanded.

"Yes. Get glaziers from Bigfield. They're aching to help us."

"Aching, are they?"

"Sure they are. Glaziers not glazing, or whatever you call it, are unhappy, frustrated."

"I told you, Bigfield don't get in on this unless they come crawling to the old girl."

"I'm the boy who'll lead that crawl." He turned to Leila. "Miss Page, I take it you have made the appropriate alterations on my wardrobe."

"The sleeves are shortened on the coat, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. And I also take it that as my secretary you are up on your lines."

"Yes, sir! No, sir! Very good sir! And may I say that I think your plan is just as you have described it."

"How have I described it?"

"The quinessence of asininity."

I 3

The day had begun unexpectedly hot and quite humid. Leila had warned Ralph he was going to cook in Papa's suit, especially as he not only had the wool coat around him, but the wool pants up under his armpits, too.

As usual, Gloomy Gus had been right. Ralph *was* cooking. The back office of Bigfield's chamber of commerce had a window cooler, but with the extreme humidity, its effect was little more than that of a wet noise.

The secretary and board members were in their shirt sleeves and Mr. Carr, the president, observing Ralph's beaded forehead, suggested, "Mr. Bayless, why be formal in this weather? Take off your coat like the rest of us."

Emphatically Ralph shook his head. "I . . . ah . . . thank you. But I will remain coated. It would not do for me to take it off."

He caught Leila's eye and saw her teeth bite down on her lower lip and her shoulders begin to shake.

Damn the girl! he thought. This is a fine time for her to be developing a sense of humour!

But she got control of herself and turned the incipient laugh into a cough.

"Miss Page," he directed suavely, "the pictures. If you will be so kind."

"Very good, sir." Leila opened her little satchel and presented Ralph with the photographs.

One by one he held them up. "I am sure you gentlemen *and* lady (for Venice Smith had been invited to the meeting) will appreciate the historical significance of these street scenes of early Pearl, and will also appreciate

how fortunate I was to obtain them from Mrs. Beach. The detail is magnificent. And these are but a few of many. Mrs. Beach has a superb collection of—shall we call it—Pearliana. Miss Page was privileged to go through the collection and is of the same opinion. Are you not, Miss Page?”

“Indeed, yes, sir. Superb!”

He continued. “These . . . ah . . . clients that I represent . . . I regret that at this point I am not in a position to reveal their name. Hereinafter they shall be referred to as the Family. With a capital ‘F.’ This . . . ah . . . Family has for a long time been interested in Americana. It is their desire to bring about the restoration of an old-time western mining town. It would be similar in scope to the one at Williamsburg. You are all cognizant, I am sure, of what the Rockefellers have done at Williamsburg, how a piece of colonial life has been brought back for the delight and enlightenment of both this present generation and of generations to come.”

He cleared his throat and wiped his brow. “Now I will not say that this Family is as rich or as powerful as the Fords, or the Rockefellers, or even the Astors. You will bear me out in this, Miss Page?”

“No, sir. Not as rich.”

“But it is a Family as rich as . . . as rich as . . .” He let his voice trail off. He shrugged his shoulders. “Comparisons are odious, so they say. However, I can reveal this much. The Family’s fortune is a mining fortune. You can understand then why they wish to restore a mining town and bring it back in all its rip-roaring authenticity. Accurate in every detail. If I may make a little joke, accurate down to the last rip and roar.

“Circumstances . . . and I am sorry to be so vague, gentlemen, and lady . . . circumstances cause this Family

to desire to restore the ghost town of Pearl. Such a restoration, such a piece of history brought back out of the past would be . . . to speak in the vernacular . . . a pretty plum for any community. But great wealth entails great responsibility. The Family wishes to be certain that this . . . ah . . . plum be bestowed upon a worthy community."

"But Hell's bells!" sputtered the ebullient Mr. Carr, who was Bigfield's leading contractor, as well as president of the bank, "Bigfield is worthy. You couldn't find a *worthier* town."

"So I would think from my slight acquaintance with it. However, the Family will wish a proof of the pudding, so to speak."

"Well, sir, we're willing to give you any proof you want."

"The Family is eager to make the big effort but first your town must make the little effort. Shall I be specific?"

Venice Smith now spoke for the first time. "For Heaven's sake, *do* be specific, Mr. Bayless. I'd like to know what this is all about in *plain* language."

Ralph looked at her, seeing a big, grey-haired woman of force and vitality. He could well imagine how she and Mrs. Beach must have tangled.

"Mrs. Smith, I *will* be specific. If a certain amount of preliminary work is done at Pearl it is reasonable to expect certain sums to be forthcoming from the Family. Or to put it briefly: Before the Family makes a large investment, Bigfield must make a small one."

"Money in this town is hard to come by."

"There are other investments besides money, Mrs. Smith."

"Such as?"

"Time, energy, imagination."

"You're still vague, Mr. Bayless."

"Very well. Before the Family rehabilitates the whole of Pearl, Bigfield must rehabilitate a small portion of it, say one block of one street."

"And you don't think that means money?"

"Perhaps. • But not necessarily from Bigfield itself. However, if your town's carpenters, glaziers, plumbers and so on would contribute their skills, a lot could be accomplished, and as for the actual money, well . . . there is Mrs. Beach."

He saw Mrs. Smith stiffen and the rest of his audience look uncomfortable.

Quickly he went on. "More vital than Mrs. Beach's money is her Pearlana, the priceless collection of relics and mementos. I do not wish to bring up an embarrassing subject but . . ."

"Bring it up," Mrs. Smith ordered, "*bring it up!*"

"I am aware that Mrs. Beach and Bigfield are not on the best of terms."

"Not on the best of terms!" Mrs. Smith snorted. "She'd cut our throats before she'd help us!"

Mr. Egger, the stooped, cadaverous secretary who so far had not said a word, but had merely sat in disapproving silence, now spoke up. "There is a very hostile situation there, very hostile indeed."

Mrs. Smith said, "So far as I'm concerned, I stick by my guns. I called her stuff 'junk' and a lot of it *is* junk."

"But some of it is priceless junk," Ralph said reprovingly. "What it needs is winnowing."

"And how!"

"Naturally with *your* taste the winnowing would have been well done. But to old persons—*very* old persons"—he saw how pleased Mrs. Smith looked at the adjective "old", "their belongings are sacred. It is a matter of great delicacy to divide the valueless from the

valuable. I'm sure you would have been equal to the task. But being as old as she is Mrs. Beach cannot reconcile herself to the fact that winnowing is necessary."

Mr. Carr said bluntly, "I guess we should have taken it all and done our winnowing afterwards."

"There was also some trouble about the birds," another member put in.

"The birds were nesting," Mr. Egger explained. "What Mrs. Beach wanted done was inhumane. To saw off that limb!"

"We could have moved the bench," Mr. Carr said, "or put up an umbrella, done *something*."

"Fruitless to speculate on the might-have-been," Ralph told them. "But listen to this. By a strange coincidence, at exactly the same time that the Family had this idea of reviving Pearl, Mrs. Beach also had the same idea. And all on her own—oh, with a little help from that old prospector and those car—those theatrical people who are staying at Pearl—she has tidied up the old graveyard, brought over her father's statue to stand there . . ."

"Don't tell me," cried Venice Smith, "that she's toted over that piece of marble to Pearl! It's actually there, that old monstrosity?"

"The statue of her father is standing on a pedestal in the graveyard where it rightfully belongs."

"Heaven's to Betsy! She wanted to bring the thing down here, put it in front of our museum."

"Much more appropriate where it is. The founder of Pearl in Pearl. It is touching the way the old lady stands and looks at her father and then turns and looks toward Bigfield. There is regret in her eyes and longing. Wouldn't you say there was regret and longing, Miss Page?"

"Indeed, yes, sir."

"I'll be doggoned," said Venice Smith.

"Moreover, Mrs. Beach is attempting to get the old post office ready to house her collection. Even Miss Page and I have worked in the post office. I tried to put in a window." He held up his bandaged thumb. "With what results you see."

"Ho, ho, ho," guffawed Mr. Carr. Then he stopped in embarrassment. "I mean putting in window glass is a job for a professional."

"So it is, Mr. Carr. And so are many other jobs that the old lady, in her lack of wisdom, thinks she can attempt. Mrs. Smith, gentlemen, Pearl *needs* Bigfield! Mrs. Beach needs Bigfield." He turned to Venice Smith. "Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Beach needs *you*!"

"Me? She *hates* me."

"No. And I have this on good authority."

"What authority?"

"Of the cook. Maggie is her name, I believe."

"What did Maggie say?"

"She told me that Mrs. Beach misses Bigfield and misses you, and—" why not pile it on thick, he thought, "and that her life is empty without your companionship."

"Maggie said that! I thought *she* hated me, too."

"Mrs. Beach is an old woman," Ralph continued. "Much as she wants to make the first move in a reconciliation, she can't make it. The stubbornness of *age* prevents her. Just as an arthritic can't move his physical joints, the old lady can't move her emotional joints. She *can't*. You, Mrs. Smith, is a woman of flexibility and sophistication, as a woman with much more youth, must do it for her. Your graciousness will make it possible for old Mrs. Beach to yield."

"I think," Mr. Carr burst out, "we should damn well go up there in a body and apologize. If eating a little crow is all that keeps us from that nice fat plum, well, let's eat

that crow. Here we've been sitting on our fannies doing nothing . . ."

"I resent that," Secretary Egger broke in. "We have *not* just been sitting on our fannies. I can show you letter after letter that I have written to various mining companies trying to interest them . . ."

"Mining companies!" cried Carr. "Egger, that's the same old basket. Mr. Bayless is right. We should forget about mining, move our eggs to another basket. I, for one, think we were stinkers about the birds. Even if *you* do love birds, Egger, and there's nothing wrong in that. Lots of people love birds. My wife has canaries. But we were stinkers just the same. And Venice, I think . . . I think . . ."

"You think I should have taken her junk *in toto* and winnowed afterwards."

"Well," said Mr. Carr, turning his head and giving Ralph the merest suggestion of a wink, "she's an *old, old* lady, and you're a much younger woman. I say if we have to eat crow, let's all eat on the bird together."

"I imagine you will not eat very much, nor will you be dining alone," Ralph prophesied soothingly. "After you take the first bite, Mrs. Beach will be dining with you."

"Well," said Mrs. Smith, "if we have to crawl to Edie Beach to get our Pearl . . ."

"Mrs. Smith," Ralph interrupted, "do you realize what you've said?"

"What did I say?"

"You said 'our Pearl'. '~~Our~~ Pearl.' And that's what it is, Bigfield's Pearl. It's your Pearl. ~~A~~ brief, simple phrase. That will appeal to the Family. The Family appreciates brevity and simplicity. Mrs. Smith, I congratulate you."

"Thank you," Mrs. Smith answered, looking a little bewildered.

Mr. Carr took it up. "It's our Pearl. Not bad. We'll get busy, get people hot on it. Not only the workmen. Everybody! Boy scouts, girl scouts, church groups. You want a piece of that ghost revived. Boy, we'll revive it! It will be alive and kicking in no time!"

"Excellent, Mr. Carr. Then with photographs and typed descriptions—I count on the faithful Miss Page for help in this—I will make up a prospectus, submit it to the Family as evidence of the community's effort and worthiness, and who knows *what* will happen. Right, Miss Page?"

"Right, sir. Who knows?"

Ralph got to his feet. He bent over and kissed Mrs. Smith's hand. "I salute a clever and charming lady who has given us our slogan." He sat down again. "And now, gentlemen, shall we plan our campaign? It is my opinion that the first workmen on the place should be plumbers . . ."

The Chevvie sped along. Ralph had not only removed his coat but he had pulled his shirt out of his trousers and opened it to the waist.

"Man alive, was it hot in there! At one point I was ready to take off all my clothes and be a living statue just like the Pilchers. And don't say, 'I told you so.'"

"I won't, but how *could* you make up all those lies?"

"Not lies, Leila, frabrigations. I don't think I told a single out-and-out lie."

"But," she went on, "those people are going to work to restore Pearl under the assumption that you have access to great wealth. You are taking their labour under false pretences. Suppose they find out?"

"Suppose! Suppose! Suppose!" He held up his

thumb. "See that. Suppose it gets infected, suppose it has to be cut off, suppose I lose my hand, my arm, my life! Stop always expecting the worst. And even if it happens, so what?"

"Yes. So what do we do if the worst happens and we're found out?"

"Leave town, of course. And fast! Thanks to Mrs. Beach and the salary paid in advance, we have the money to do it. Until that happens—and it may not happen—we carry on, pick ourselves up a little easy dough. Never give a sucker a break, as Mr. Barnum once said. And we just might succeed. we just might revive the ghost. At any rate we've reconciled two old ladies. Mrs. Smith is going to crawl—her own words—to Mrs. Beach."

"Suppose even if she crawls, Mrs. Beach won't forgive her."

"Gloomy Gus again. She *will* forgive her. And, boy, didn't Mrs. Smith fall for that 'younger woman' stuff! I had her eating right out of my hand."

"Yes, you did." Then she turned and smiled at him.

"Me, too. I think you're going to put it over."

"Yippee!" he burst out. "Now I *do* have confidence in myself." He stretched out an arm and gave her a quick hug. She shrank away from him and he withdrew his arm.

The road turned and began to climb. The setting sun was in their eyes. He pulled down the visors.

"Leila, tell me something. Who scared you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I put my arm around you in a casual hug, and you act as if I were Jack the Ripper. What happened to you? Or was it your mother who was scared?"

"Well," she said slowly, "Mother did hate men. Because of my father. I don't like to talk about it. He was

a philanderer. And then my best friend's husband, he was another one. He even made passes at me. I guess I was meant to be an old maid."

"But lots of men aren't philanderers."

"You say you're one."

"Well . . . You shouldn't believe everything I say. And even if I am, lots of men aren't. So stop thinking you're going to be an old maid. The right guy will come along. Relax! Have fun!"

She looked at him for a long minute and then smiled. "I am relaxed. I am having fun. This is such a ridiculous adventure. But it *is* fun."

"That's good." He put his arm along the back of the seat, but without touching her. After a little she leaned forward and opened the glove compartment where she had her notebook and pencil. "I want to write down the mileage. This trip is business. It can be a deduction."

"My little C.P.A. There is something so unappealing about mileage, speedometer readings, deductions."

"But . . ."

"I know. Suppose somebody wants to audit our books. Well, I, too, have been doing some supposing, preparing for the worst. You see, we've got to move out of that saloon, and I agree with you that we can't occupy a house together . . ."

She interrupted, "I think people are going to find it's very odd that the Family's employees stay in Pearl at all."

"Oh, I don't know. I've stressed the Family's eccentricity. And the way I visualize our employers, they'd like us to rough it and be rugged. Like Mussolini making his generals play leap frog."

"And remember what happened to Mussolini."

"Believe me, Leila, they won't string us up by the heels. I promise you the worst that can happen is that

they'll run us out of town. And not even on a rail. But getting back to our future dwelling, I've found just the place for us. We can continue to be cozy and yet not offend the proprieties."

"How?"

"There's a duplex up there at High Pearl. You can have one side and I'll have the other. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, I don't know. Suppose . . ."

"Suppose we take it. You can be East and I'll be West, and often the twain shall meet. Okay?"

"Okay."

14

Bigfield had crawled to Mrs. Beach, Bigfield had eaten crow. Everybody but Mr. Egger, that is. He refused to have any part in what he called his town's abasement. As for Venice Smith, she had apologized, although not too graciously. Ralph had been right about Mrs. Beach's reaction. The minute the apologizers started eating crow, she was also eating it, admitting that she too had been to blame. Especially about the birds. "I should have found another bench," she told them. She was less lenient with Venice Smith. "You weren't very kind about Papa's things," she accused her, "but let's forget about it."

With Mr. Carr, Ralph worked out a plan for Pearl's rehabilitation and the workmen of Bigfield were moving in to repair, paint, prop up, and prove to the Family that their town was worthy of the big plum. And that meant of course that the inhabitants of Low Pearl must move to High Pearl.

Even Walt was deserting his lair. "Goin' up in the world," he chortled. "Me and Emily livin' in High

Pearl!" He had chosen a small house on the edge of the bluff.

The Mirandas, being the biggest family, took the biggest house, the one that used to belong to the mine superintendent. The Pilcher family took the next largest. Uncle Rollo, Mindy and Sally and her pups were established in a small house next to Walt's. Sally at last had had her litter of six pups. But much to Rollo's disappointment and chagrin she had delivered them all by herself in the middle of the night without anyone's help.

"Her great moment," Rollo mourned. "Why didn't she bark and awaken me?" He seemed quite hurt about it.

His brother said, "She knows how hard you work day-times, she didn't want to disturb your rest."

Rollo missed the sarcasm. "Yes, that was probably it. Sally's very considerate."

Ralph and Leila had the duplex next to the Pilchers and in deciding who'd have which side Ralph said if Leila didn't mind he'd take the west side. "I have a reason," he told her.

When she didn't ask what the reason was he said, "My uncurious friend, since you won't ask, I'll tell you."

"Do."

"I want the west side because on the east side Suzie May's upstairs window looks down into mine, and she has informed me that if I take that side she and I can talk to each other from our windows just like Romeo and Juliet. So you take the east side."

"But I don't want to talk to her either."

"Oh, Leila . . ."

"That's right, she won't be talking so much to me."

Ralph grinned in assent. "If she's got something important to say, let her come down and knock on my door."

or call over to you and you can relay the message to me."

Leila said slowly, "When you told Mr. Carr that we were living in the duplex, did he think it odd?"

"Apparently not. I said we'd be doing a lot of paper work and it was important for me to have you near. Of course he and the others don't know about our living in the saloon. They think we've been visiting the whole time at Mrs. Beach's."

"We're going to be more comfortable in the duplex," Leila said, "but . . ." She hesitated.

"You don't like to leave the saloon either?"

"It *was* cosy," she smiled.

"Cosy and romantic. And I'll miss the Robinson Crusoe element, the having to make do. Now we'll be in the lap of luxury. Running water from the cistern, even if it's rusty and even if it only drips. Coal oil lamps. Real furniture. But that's *progress*, old girl. We'll have to forget those good old days when all the light we had was from the pot-bellied stove and our beds were pieces of ancient mattress and our sheets were drapes."

So they carried their suitcases up to High Pearl. Leila's bag was a loan from Mrs. Beach and in it were just the few things she'd bought in Bigfield.

They went first into Leila's side of the duplex and Ralph said, "It's not going to be so easy to talk to each other as it was in the saloon with our joint living-room. Now we'll have to be formal, go outside and knock on doors. But you know this wall isn't very substantial. I could knock a hole in it as a passageway."

"No," cried Leila sharply, "that would be too, too . . . clandestine. Too . . ."

"Hole-in-the-wallish, you mean. Okay, you're the doctor."

"But we might . . ." She stopped in embarrassment.

"Go ahead. What's your idea?"

"If we take down the wall *entirely*. Make this the office and community club-room, that would be all right. We're going to get desks and a filing case and a typewriter, you know."

"You'd feel adequately chaperoned with some office equipment?"

"Yes . . . I would."

"Okay. Let's go. I've always wanted to break up buildings." He lunged at the wall with his shoulder. A large crack appeared and some plaster fell down.

"Hadn't you better let the carpenters do that?"

Ralph lunged again. "I feel like Samson in the temple."

Suzie May suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Hi! What are you doing?"

"Just pushing over a wall."

Leila explained, "It's going to be the office and club-room, just one big room."

"Oh," said Suzie May unenthusiastically.

Ralph stopped being a Samson and rubbed his shoulder. "I guess I'd better leave it to the carpenters." He picked up his suitcase. "Now I'll go over to my side and unpack."

"Aren't you on *this* side?" Suzie May demanded. "I thought . . ."

"I like the morning sun," Leila said to her curtly.

Suzie May looked so distressed that Ralph couldn't help saying, "The lady wanted the morning sun. I had to be a noble guy and give it to her even though I'd have liked that side myself."

Suzie May looked at him sadly, then turned and went out the door, her shoulders sagging.

"You've broken her heart," Leila observed.

"Can I help it," Ralph demanded, "if I'm catnip to women?"

Pearl Day had come and gone.

Practically half the population of Bigfield had made the pilgrimage, bringing its own food in lunch boxes, drinking gallons of coffee provided by Mrs. Beach, listening intently while Ralph explained about the Family and its desire to restore the old ghost town.

For further entertainment there had been a guided tour through the graveyard with Mrs. Beach happily reminiscing about those gone before and handing out souvenir pieces of ore from Papa's monument. Walt, too, had some good stories to tell about the departed. Sometimes they differed slightly from Mrs. Beach's stories, but that didn't matter.

With the exception of Mr. Egger who continued to scorn the project of Venice Smith who said she was reserving judgment, Bigfield's enthusiasm was terrific. Everybody was eager and ready to pitch in and prove to the Family that their town was indeed worthy of the big plum.

It looked like clear sailing. Since Mindy was now registered as the eighth child of school age, bull-dozer were on the road getting it repaired and ready for the opening of school when the bus would have to travel it.

There had been one unfortunate incident. Venice Smith had caught Mindy smoking behind one of the buildings and had dragged him up to Mr. Pilcher.

"He had *this* in his mouth," she told Mindy's supposed parent, holding out with a gesture of disgust the stub of a cigar. "He must have picked it up somewhere."

Mr. Pilcher looked bewildered and then said, "Why, yes . . . yes. He shouldn't do that. Very unsanitary."

"*Unsanitary!*" she cried. "Is that all you're going to say? That child should be punished or he'll do it again."

And he probably *has* done it before, judging by the way he seemed to be enjoying it."

Still Mr. Pilcher said nothing and Uncle Rollo broke in with, "My brother is no good at discipline. That is my department. Come, nephew." He took Mindy by the ear and led him into a store building, unfastening his belt as he did so. Soon there was the sound of the strap being wielded, and after a minute, loud roars from Mindy.

"No one likes to be a rattle tale," Mrs. Smith remarked, "but it is my duty to tell on that child. If he isn't punished he'll keep on smoking. And it will stunt his growth."

Uncle Rollo came out, putting his belt back on. The roaring still kept up inside the building.

"I'm sorry you had to hurt him," Mrs. Smith said.

"Oh, he's not hurt too bad. Mindy puts on a good show. You won't catch him smoking again," he assured Mrs. Smith blandly.

Bigfield citizens were pumping the breath of life back into Pearl. It wasn't only the plumbers, painters, carpenters, glaziers, workmen of all kinds. Everybody else was getting into the act, too.

Housewives were cleaning out their attics and cellars to find old-time furniture, bric-a-brac and what-nots. A little dressmaker was making can-can costumes for the twins. Mercey's Drygoods Store was giving the black satin and white lace, and Birnbaum's Emporium was donating the black stockings and sure-grip garters.

Movers were moving, roofers were roofing, a bone and junk yard was providing pieces of iron fence to be used in the skeleton cave and to keep visitors from venturing too far into the cavern.

The Eagle Scouts had cleaned up the old theatre and a lumber company had knocked together tables and chairs

for future patrons to sit on, as well as building a snack bar at one side of the hall.

Actually the theatre was merely a dance-hall with a little stage at one end. But some theatrical posters were found in the building's basement. By papering the walls with these and arranging the tables and chairs so there was space for people to dance in the centre, Ralph figured that they had a combination of modern night club and old-time variety hall that would be irresistible to the cash customers.

Also doing his bit for Pearl was Teenie, one of Mrs. Carr's canaries. Mrs. Carr said he could be taken into the cave and the mine to test the air's purity. If he was asphyxiated, well, it was in a good cause, and he couldn't carry a tune anyway.

All the old saloon furnishings had been carted over from Beachcroft by the Bigfield Trucking Company and the Ladies of the Moose were polishing the long brass rail and the brass spittoons. Holden's Greenhouse had given the philodendrons to be planted in the spittoons because Mrs. Beach said she would *not* have the spittoons used to spit in. Under the direction of Mrs. Pilcher the Lady Oddfellows had organized a commissary to serve coffee and sandwiches to the workers. Gamble's Second-Hand Furniture Store gave a big old-fashioned ice box and Baggot's Ice Company was delivering the ice.

The club scouts were taking turns riding on Emily's back so that Emily would get used to children. Emily seemed to enjoy the cubs, perhaps because after each ride, she was rewarded with a lump of sugar.

The little boys were also catching flies to be fed to the horned toads, although so far Uncle Rollo hadn't been able to teach the horned toads to run races. Whenever he dangled a fly before them, the toads talked it over

among themselves and decided which fellow was to have the fly. "They all take turns," mourned Uncle Rollo, "and not one of them will race."

Finding and bringing in the horned toads was the job of Flat-Face Charley, an old Indian whom Walt had dug up from back in the hills. But Flat-Face Charley's main work was to make Indian arrow heads, which were to be scattered about on the ground for visitors to find. The Indian, his back braced against a wall, sat on the ground and chipped away at his pile of rocks.

Editor Philbrook of the Bigfield *Blade*, wrote numerous articles about the Pearl venture. Photographer Pease snapped pictures to illustrate the articles. These stories were sent to newspapers all over the country and, because Editor Philbrook, out of his own pocket had subscribed to a clipping service, the clippings were coming back in big batches.

Leila pasted them in a large scrapbook presented by Cripps Stationery Store and Nibs said, "I hope nobody gets a bright idea and sends any of those clippings to Hubert."

"But how could anyone get in touch with Hubert?" Ralph asked. "Nobody knows his address. He isn't in one place long enough."

Hubert's last card had been from Jerusalem. Hubert wrote he was thrilled to be in the shine of Christians, Mohammedans and Jews.

"Just wait until he sees the shrine we're building to Papa," Mrs. Beach had gloated. "Just wait!"

"I sure hope we *can* wait," Nibs had replied. "I hope he don't get wind of this too soon. I'm leery of all this here publicity."

But the publicity kept on. The Pearl story, a whole community girding its loins to revive a ghost town, was, as,

Editor Philbrook expressed it, a "natural", and one that editors picked up over and over again.

Leila meticulously pasted the clippings in the scrapbook, as well as all prints of photographs that had been taken. Except for one picture. That, she didn't paste in. It was the one that Ralph had taken of the twins propping up the statue of Papa at the graveyard.

"I think," said Leila severely, showing the picture to Ralph, "that we should tear this one up."

"Whoops!" Ralph gasped. "What lovely rumps! I took that one from the wrong angle, didn't I?"

"We should tear it up," Leila insisted.

"Okay. But it's a pity."

"I'm glad no one else has seen it," Leila said, and standing over the wastebasket she shredded the photograph into tiny bits.

Besides the scrapbook Leila also kept a daily log of the work that was done and by whom. She also had a cross-index file of all donations, listing the gifts under the name of the donor and also under the subject. She could tell instantly who had given the China washstand set, where it was exhibited, whether it was an outright gift or a loan to be returned, whether or not it needed any special treatment. Mrs. Lauder's Spode teapot, for instance, could be lifted only from the bottom, as its handle had been broken and was now merely stuck together with glue.

Ralph complained that Leila spent too much time on paper work but Leila said if things weren't organized properly they got into an awful mess and anyway wasn't she supposed to be doing a prospectus for the Family?

"Sometimes," Ralph grinned, "I believe in that Family myself."

"And what's going to happen . . . ?" she began.

"When they find out there isn't any Family? Leila, let's cross that bridge when we come to it. There's something more important which must be settled tonight. And that is are we, or are we not, going to have our lovely cheesecake?"

For Mrs. Dixon, the dressmaker, had finished the can-can costumes and Mr. Pilcher had been horrified when he saw them. His daughters parade before an audience in those lewd and scanty bits of material! Never! So that night in the clubhouse there was to be a meeting of Pearl's permanent population to pass judgment on the costumes and perhaps persuade Father Pilcher to withdraw his objection.

"And so we have another meeting," Ralph grumbled to Leila. "It seems all we do is hold open house."

"Well, after all, this is the *club* room. We planned it that way. What I didn't plan on," she told him a little accusingly, "was Suzie May as our permanent guest."

"You should shoo her home."

"She doesn't shoo as long as *you're* around."

"Well, cheer up. I'm about to have some serious competition."

"Who?"

"Fernando. He's smitten. And badly."

Fernando, lonely without his family, and not wanting to miss any of the excitement, had persuaded Mrs. Beach to let him work part time at Pearl. He had taken one look at the twins, and like the bee which knows what flower has the honey, Fernando began following Suzie May around like a little dog.

"He and Suzie May are out of the same mould," Ralph went on. "Fernando *likes* women

"I'm afraid that's not going to do him much good with Suzie May. She told me she'd never fall in love with a

man who couldn't be a living statue. He doesn't have to *be* a living statue, that is, earn his living at it, but he has to have a figure for it. And Fernando is too short and stocky."

"A figure isn't everything," Ralph said, unconsciously straightening his shoulders and pulling in his stomach.

"The way Suzie May has been brought up it is. So I don't think you're going to have any competition. And I don't think that makes you too unhappy either."

"Could be," Ralph admitted complacently. "The old male ego, you know."

The audience was waiting at the clubhouse. Fernando had stayed over for the show. Let Nibs do the evening milking. Fernando wasn't going to miss seeing his beloved all dressed up.

The twins walked in, looking a little embarrassed and self-conscious in their can-can finery, but a vision just the same. Their little hats cocked on the side of their heads, the black corselets nipping their waists, their skirts a froth of lace, the black garters and stockings seductive against their gleaming white thighs.

Walt slapped his knee and gave a long, appreciative whistle.

"That's what I mean," their father cried, "that's *just* what I mean. No one ever whistled at them when they *didn't* wear clothes."

"Well, now I'm sorry," Walt apologized. "But they looked so . . . so . . ."

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Pilcher, "something to be whistled at."

"Of course I'm only a little boy," observed Mindy in his new voice, "but it sure looks good to me!"

Paying no attention to Mindy, Mr. Pilcher pointed at

Fernando. "And that young man! He didn't whistle, but look at the expression on his face. Drooling!"

Quite unsuccessfully Fernando tried to change his expression.

"Those clothes!" Mr. Pilcher continued. "They are indecent and . . . and . . . sexy."

"The two are not synonymous," Ralph interrupted, "and right now they have on more clothes than they usually wear."

"It isn't *what's* worn, it's *how* it's worn. Those black garters and black stockings. They are nothing else but S-E-X. If those could be removed . . ."

"But you *can't* have can-can costumes without the black garters and stockings," Ralph protested.

"I agree," said Uncle Rollo, "without garters and stockings there's no can-can, S-E-X notwithstanding."

Donaldine said, "If we don't wear the garters and stockings Mr. Birnbaum will be hurt. He was so proud to donate them."

"They are very good garters," said Suzie May, snapping one of them, "and bee-yu-ti-ful stockings." She stretched out her leg, turning it from side to side and rolling her eyes to Ralph.

Mr. Pilcher appealed to his wife. "Mother, what do *you* think?"

"Frankly I prefer them as they are to the way they look without any clothes on at all."

Suzie May, her eyes still mooning at Ralph, said, "It was awfully kind of you to teach us the dance. And I'm sure if *you* think the costumes are all right, they are."

Leila spoke up next and to Ralph's surprise she was on his side. "It's hard to judge a costume out of its setting. Right now they look . . . well . . . strange. But in the old

theatre, with music, as part of an evening's entertainment, they'd be beautiful."

"Would *you* wear such a costume?" Mr. Pilcher demanded.

"But I don't dance."

"You could dance this dance all right. All you do is stand on one leg and twirl the other, and from time to time bend over and flip up your skirts. Ugly and ungraceful, that's the kind of a dance it is. You could certainly learn it; it's not difficult." When Leila didn't answer he repeated, "Would *you* wear a can-can costume?"

"Yes," she said, "I'd wear it if I felt by doing so I could contribute to the Pearl project. But of course I couldn't contribute. You remember, Mr. Pilcher, when you first saw me, you said that I didn't have the kind of a figure that people would pay to see."

"Yes, I did say that," Mr. Pilcher admitted, looking at her through narrowed eyes. "But since then you've put on weight. That makes a difference. I think now they *would* pay to see you."

Ralph burst out laughing. "Leila, thank the man for his compliment, and I may hold you to your promise to be a can-can girl. They say good things come in threes."

"You're being ridiculous," Leila scolded him.

Old Man Miranda, who had been sitting quietly in the background, now spoke up. "When I look at the *senoritas* I do not have any bad thoughts, only happy thoughts. I think the *senoritas* should wear the dresses. Everybody will look, everybody will be happy." He sat there smiling benevolently and his plump wife nodded her head in agreement. "*Si, si,*" she said, "*nuy bonita.*"

Mr. Pilcher made a gesture of resignation. "I give up! Wear the costumes! Let 'em whistle, let 'em drool! The show must go on!"

Then Suzie May walked over and sat down beside Ralph. "I want to practise a lot on our dance and get it down pat."

"We'll do better when we have the music," Ralph said. "Wortman's Music Store is going to give us a phonograph and some records."

Fernando now came and sat on the other side of Suzie May. "I play the banjo. I can make music for you. I hear the tune once and I play it as good as the phonograph."

"Why that's very kind of you, Fernando," Donaldine said.

"Yes," said Suzie May without enthusiasm, and she didn't look grateful in the least.

Everybody had gone now and Leila sat down at the typewriter and rolled a card in the machine.

"Leila, you're *not* cross-filing at this hour!"

"Just a couple of cards about Wortman's Music Store giving the phonograph and the records. We mustn't forget anyone. They all want recognition."

She typed the two cards and then Ralph said, "The girls looked cute, didn't they?"

"They did."

"And Fernando's joining the act. My competition is moving in."

"It won't do him any good."

"You think her heart belongs to Daddy."

"If by 'Daddy' you mean you, yes."

Ralph hummed the Mary Martin tune and Leila said thoughtfully, "'Oh, what a web we weave, when first we practise to deceive.'"

"Now what?"

"I'm thinking that all this," she made a vague encompassing gesture, "all this has come about because I was deceitful."

"You're not being very lucid. As Walt says, 'Chew it finer.'"

"The thousand dollars that my aunt left me, and that's burnt up . . ."

"Yes."

"Well, I wasn't honest about it with Jack's wife. I let her think I was just about broke. So that's why she suggested I travel with you."

"Are you sorry?"

"No . . . whatever happens."

He looked at her, wondering why she'd used those last two words.

She went on, "So I travel with you, and we land at Pearl, and then Walt deceives us, and then we deceive Mrs. Beach, and next all those people in Bigfield, and Mindy is pretending that he is six years old and deceiving the school authorities . . ."

"Mindy worries me, too."

". . . and Mr. Egger is awfully suspicious of us and Mrs. Smith, too. . . . Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm visualizing you in a can-can costume. I agree with Mr. Pilcher. The customers *would* pay."

"No can-can for me."

"Leila, you *promised*. Surely you'd twirl for Pearl?"

Carefully she put the cover on the typewriter. "I'm tired and I'm going to bed." She paused at the door of her side of the duplex. "Good night."

With his fist Ralph hit the wall a resounding blow.

"These walls are built too doggone well."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, if I wake up in the middle of the night and want to say something to you, you can't hear me."

"But you can tell it to me in the morning."

"I might forget."

Gravely she handed him a card and a pencil. "Write it down."

"Thank you, Leila, you think of everything."

15

It was fall. The road was finished. Every morning the bus came to take the little Mirandas and Mindy to school. And every day the road was black with cars coming to Pearl.

The visitors arrived in droves, not only from all over the country but, as Ralph had predicted, from all over the world. An Australian family said they were going back home and revive a ghost town of their own. A French count seeing the twin: twirl their beautiful legs, kept shouting, "Bis!" "Bis!" Some Arabs in burnouses and turbans—on their way to the University of Arizona to study date culture—stopped to gaze and wonder and the young shiek wanted to give up agriculture and join the show.

"Now *he*," said Papa Pilcher, referring to the sheik, "could be a living statue. Even wrapped up like that, you can tell by the way he walks." But much to Mr. Pilcher's sorrow no living-statue act was included in Pearl's entertainment. Mrs. Beach was still adamant on that score. There were to be no nudes at Pearl.

She herself was having the time of her life. The sun was scarcely up before Nibs would deliver her to the cemetery. She sat there by the statue, at a little table under a big umbrella, and regaled all comers with tales of Pearl and Papa and presented them with pieces of ore from the pile around the pedestal.

But even more fun was what Mrs. Beach did on Friday and Saturday nights, the big nights at Pearl. For on these

nights, old-time variety shows were given in the refurbished theatre. While the guests sat at tables drinking their beer—by this time a beer and wine licence had been obtained—the entertainers did their stuff on the little stage.

The twins danced the can-can, Mr. Pilcher and Fernando sang cowboy songs. Mr. Pilcher had a fair voice and Fernando a very good one. Uncle Rollo and Sally were on the bill of course, and how the customers loved Sally when she came out walking on her hind legs, a little hat tied under her chin, and carrying a parasol. And how they applauded when she said, "How do you do!"

At the very end of the programme came Mrs. Beach. She sat down at the little organ and sang the old-time songs in her cracked, sweet voice. She soon had the audience singing, too. "Everybody!" she'd call, and the audience, waving their mugs, would chime in with her.

Pearl's night entertainment appealed not only to the tourists but also to people in the surrounding towns, in Morgan, Copper City, Wellton, and the other nearby communities.

Then Ralph had a brain storm that really made the nights a success. "Hostesses!" he'd shouted. "High society, snob appeal, and all that stuff!" And he'd gone on to elucidate. Let very select committees of society women in each town choose groups of local girls to be hostesses at the theatre, the girls to dress in dance-hall costumes—provided at their own expense—and wait on the customers.

"If you make it exclusive enough," Ralph said, "we'll have the girls fighting to serve at our tables. And we won't just get free help, the little sweethearts will bring along their friends as well. More dough in the till."

And that was exactly the way it had worked out. Local debts in different towns did scramble for the privilege of

serving beer at Pearl and they brought their dates, friends and relatives to swell the gate receipts.

Ralph appointed Mrs. Carr to be in charge of the over-all Hostess Committee, and she carried his idea even further. She organized committees of older women, and also their husbands—the men, it must be admitted, under protest—to dress up in old-time finery and take their turns at guiding visitors about the streets of Pearl. This, too, became the smart thing to do. It enhanced one's social prestige to be chosen as a Pearl senior host or hostess. Only Mr. Egger absolutely refused to be a host.

The post office museum with Mrs. Beach's Pearlana and mementos and relics was extremely popular, but so were the displays in the other buildings—in the saloon, the drug store, the dry goods store, the original Wells Fargo office. So many donations had been made it was hard to find places to put them. As one energetic cleaner-outer remarked, "It's such a grand way to get rid of a lot of old things. You feel right proud, too, to see what you've given displayed so nicely and the little card with your name printed on it and all."

So Pearl was a *success*. Not only a historical success, a contribution to Americana, but a financial success. It was making money. Enough to pay expenses and some salaries, too. Very modest salaries but as Mr. Pilcher said, "To people like us anything regular is a bonanza."

Mindy naturally didn't see why he shouldn't have a pay cheque, too, since he was getting educated for Pearl. It was explained to him that there was no way to carry a six-year-old child on the payroll.

There was some talk of paying back the merchants for material they had contributed and the workmen for their labour. But Leila said before they did this they should get legal advice. Because if they were a cultural foundation,

the tax situation would be different than if they were a profit-making enterprise. She thought it would be wise to keep Pearl on a cultural basis and plough all money above expenses and a few necessary salaries back into the project.

All the concessions were making money. Mrs. Beach, sitting by Papa's statue, sold the little pamphlets about Pearl and Papa that the *Bigfield Blade* had published. Editor Philbrook had written the story and had done a good job. If anyone refused to buy the booklet Mrs. Beach gave it to him free and charged it to herself. "Everyone," she said, "must know about Papa."

So many children rode on Emily's back that Walt said the town would have to buy her oats; she didn't have time to forage for her grass. Emily loved the oats and got sleek and fat even with all her exercise. "Hope she don't forget how to scrounge for herself," Walt worried. "This free-oats deal ain't goin' to last forever."

The gold-panning pool was very popular. When someone found a little nugget, there was great excitement. Not that this happened very often. Just enough to keep people interested and paying for the privilege of panning. "This is mighty nice pickin's," Walt said about his enterprise, "but one of these days me and Emily's goin' to take off for the hills and do some real prospectin'."

As for Sally, during the day she had her abode in a little tent, over which hung a big sign reading: "SALLY, THE TALKING DOG." With the help of her master, she held conversations with the visitors and sold picture postcards of herself.

Mrs. Pilcher and the twins—when the twins weren't up on the stage—ran the snack bar and sold beer, soft drinks, sandwiches, coffee, candy bars, cigarettes, gum and various little curios.

Walt had worked up quite a business with his trays of mineral specimens, on exhibit by the snack bar, as had Flat-Face Charley with his Indian arrow heads. When disappointed hunters reported they hadn't been able to find any arrow heads, Charley could always manage to bring one forth from the bosom of his shirt. It was a very valuable one, he'd say, and he hated to part with it, but for a price he would.

Ralph had been right about the skeleton cave being the greatest drawing card of all. People, it seemed, loved to be scared and horrified. Walt was in charge of the tours into the cave and would take only so many people at a time. Teenie in his cage was always under the old man's arm and at the cave entrance he would appoint one person as bird watcher. "Now keep your eye on that there canary," he'd warn. "'Cause when I get to jabberin' I get kinda careless. So the minute you see that bird droopin' you holler. Maybe he's just takin' forty winks or maybe he's gettin' sick from the gas. If he's sick we gotta get outa here, quick! But don't be scared, folks. That there bird'll die long before we do."

Poor Teenie! He never got a chance to doze in the cave. The minute he closed one eye he would be prodded awake by the bird watcher just to be sure it was drowsiness attacking him, not mine gas.

Walt had some good stories to tell about the skeletons. The stories were different from time to time but who cared about that? At the end of the day when he was tired he sometimes told the true tale, or at least the one that was probably true, that some Indians had been mining for turquoise and a sudden cave-in had cut off their exit and they had starved to death. Long afterwards when the cave was discovered and opened up by white miners, they had been too superstitious to remove the skeletons and had simply left the cave the way it was.

In one of his stories, Walt injected a romantic angle. He had it that a tribe of Indians had captured the women of another tribe, and when the avenging husbands, fathers, and brothers came to rescue them, the kidnappers put the stolen females in the cave for safe-keeping. Outside the battle was fought so bitterly that all the warriors on both sides were killed. Then to complete the tragedy, the cave-in buried the women.

At this point Walt would cackle and say, "Just goes to show, folks, you shouldn't fool round with other fellers' wives."

Another version involved a brave band of United States Cavalry which pursued the hostiles to the mountain, forced them into the cave, and then with their cannon—somebody did ask once if cavalry carried cannon—bombarded the entrance until they brought down the earth and walled up the Indians.

Walt had still another yarn about stage robbers fleeing with an army payroll and hiding in the cave with the gold. Then came the landslide and slow death by starvation.

"Crime don't pay," philosophized Walt.

Whatever the story Walt could certainly hold his audience enraptured. Only when Teenie dozed was there an interruption. Then somebody would yell, "The canary! He's drooping!" And once again Teenie would be prodded awake so that the story could go on.

Ralph, who came in to listen occasionally, marvelled at Walt's histrionic ability. "He and Mrs. Beach," he said to Leila one afternoon as she worked on the books in the club-room, "they're a pair of hams. I wish I could get people to eat out of my hand the way they do."

Leila looked up from her typing. "I think you've got people eating out of your hand right now."

"But not across the footlights. Well, maybe that's not

my bent. Maybe my forte is to be a front-of-the-house man."

"You've certainly organized this Pearl project. It's amazing. What started out as a hoax, really, is now a going concern. We're *making money!* I don't mean just our personal salaries from Mrs. Beach. I mean Pearl itself."

"I know. It worries me."

"That we're making money?"

"No, that everything is going so well. It's going *too* well. Something's bound to happen."

"Now who's being a Gloomy Gus?"

"Me. And I'm out of character."

She bent over her books again. "Changing the subject, do you know anything about a burro's eating habits?"

"No. Why?"

"Seems to me Emily eats a lot of oats."

"My little Scotchwoman! Worried about Teenie's bird seed, too?"

"No, but all this oats seems too much for one little burro."

"Emily's working hard and *who* else around here would be eating oats?"

"I'll ask Fernando about it; he'll know."

"And how is our Romeo coming along with Suzie May?"

Leila turned and looked at him, smiling slightly. "You know, sometimes I think he's making progress. The other day she said she wished he were taller, and she admits he has a beautiful voice."

"He *has* a good voice and he's another one who can put himself across to an audience." Ralph looked out the window. "Speaking of Fernando, here comes the lady of his dreams herself."

"I thought we'd been a long time without her. You've been here *almost* ten minutes."

Suzie May entered, a letter in her hand, which she gave to Ralph. "It came on the ice truck."

Ralph opened and read the letter. "I was right," he said when he had finished, "the roof is about to fall in."

"But what does it say?" Leila demanded.

"It's from Carr. A meeting of the chamber of commerce has been called and he wants us there."

"Why does that mean the roof is falling?"

"Carr says for us to bring the prospectus."

"It's ready and up to date."

"Something's wrong, girls. I feel it in my bones."

This time the weather was hot and dry and the electric cooler in the back office of the chamber of commerce was working fine. Also this time Ralph was in blue jeans and a thin white shirt. He was physically comfortable but not otherwise. He could sense too much tension in the room and he didn't like the uncomfortable expressions on the faces of most of the members, or the gloating look in Mr. Egger's beady eyes. And he saw that Egger rather than Carr, seemed to be in charge of the meeting.

The big scrapbook lay in the middle of the table. With a dramatic flourish, Egger pointed to it. "Yes, Mr. Bayless, that is a very good prospectus, neatly and expertly prepared by Miss Page. And what does the . . . ah . . . Family think of it?"

"The Family . . ." Ralph began.

"Has not yet seen it," Mr. Egger finished for him.

"Why, no, they haven't."

"No," Mr. Egger nodded, putting his fingertips carefully together. "The Family has not seen the prospectus and I think I know the reason why, and I have called this meeting to divulge that reason." He looked around the table triumphantly. "The Family hasn't seen it because, except

in the active imagination of Mr. Bayless, there *is* no family. And how do I know that, Mr. Bayless?" he demanded of Ralph.

"How?" asked Ralph.

"Because, Mr. Bayless, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, is postmaster here in Bigfield. He is, as you can see, in a position to give me information, and when I asked for it he gave it to me." Mr. Egger was speaking with great deliberation, enjoying himself hugely. "My brother-in-law has informed me that no mail *from* anyone has come to you and that you have sent out no mail *to* anyone.

"Now I ask you, gentlemen and Mrs. Smith, is it reasonable to suppose that this Family, this much-touted Family with the much-touted millions, in *all* this time, would never *once* communicate with their employee, or that Mr. Bayless would never *once* communicate with his employers? I ask that question?"

The long-winded speech had given Ralph time to think, time to discard the first explanation that he had done all his communicating by telephone. *That* would be too easy to check. He said, "You have asked a good question, Mr. Egger, a very good question." Then he got to his feet and walked over to a large map of the county hanging on the wall. With his finger he drew an imaginary circle around Bigfield. "Within this circle are half a dozen towns—Morgan, Copper City, Wellton, and so on. All of them have post offices receiving mail and sending out mail. Now I ask you, gentlemen and Mrs. Smith, is it reasonable to suppose that a Family, as *beat on* secrecy as the one I work for, would risk having mail come and go from a local post office? I ask you, gentlemen, is that reasonable?"

Mr. Carr suddenly burst out into a loud laugh. "No, by gosh, it isn't reasonable. Of course you'd arrange to get your mail somewhere else."

"Moreover, Mr Egger," said Ralph, pursuing the attack, "your brother-in-law has let himself in for serious charges. The United States Mail is a sacred trust. No postmaster has the right to divulge whether people get mail or send out mail." He turned to Leila. "Miss Page, you will summarize Mr. Egger's remarks about his brother-in-law. I am sorry you did not take down Mr. Egger's speech verbatim."

As Leila began busily writing, Mr. Carr said, "Well, Egger, looks like Alex has got himself out on a limb, right alongside those birds."

All of a sudden Mr. Egger looked terrified. "But, Alex . . . I mean it was my idea. He didn't mean any harm. He has a large family, my sister is not well . . ."

"I do not wish to cause your relative any trouble," Ralph said magnanimously, "but he should be warned that his position is one of trust and he violates that trust when he gives out facts about the mail of his patrons."

Mr. Egger wiped his brow. "Yes, yes. I quite agree."

Ralph sat down again by Mr. Carr, who looked at him quizzically and said under his breath, "Got out of that mousetrap, didn't you?" To the others he announced, "I myself don't give a damn about the Family. I beg your pardon, Mr. Bayless. But Pearl is making money! That prospectus shows it even if we didn't have plenty of other proof. Bigfield's had a shot in the arm. There's a ten-unit motel going up and another one is dickering for some property right this minute. You know what that means to a contractor, and to a banker. And I hear good news all over. Gasoline sales are up. Restaurants are selling more meals. The curio shops are thriving. Business is *good*! And we've done it *alone*, pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. And this is just the beginning. Why the hell do we *need* the Family? Again I beg your pardon, Mr. Bayless,

and I hope you won't write any of my remarks to the Family from Morgan, Copper City, Wellton . . . or from wherever it is you send your mail." Again there was that amused, quizzical look in his eyes.

It flashed across Ralph's mind: Carr knows the score.

The banker continued, "I say let's forget about the Family for the *present*. Let's carry on the way we are. Maybe we can swing this by ourselves."

There was a murmur of assent around the table and the members visibly relaxed.

Someone said weakly, "But if there's millions to be got . . ."

"I don't say not to *get* the millions, just wait a while. Long as this Family don't pay the piper, they don't call the tune. We call our own tune."

Mrs. Smith rapped her knuckles on the table. "I would like to bring up something which is quite important. As you know, I did not approve of this venture at first but it has certainly turned out differently from what I expected. I'm willing to back water. I'm all for Pearl. *And . . .*" she paused dramatically and looked around her with an air of triumph, ". . . I have found an unexpected pearl in our midst. A most amazing pearl!" Again she paused and nodded her head with satisfaction.

"Okay, Venice, okay," Mr. Carr prodded, "don't keep us in suspense. What is this pearl you've dug up?"

"It's that child, Mindy."

A chill swept over Ralph. Now what?

"He's a prodigy," Venice Smith announced, "a real prodigy. I've had plenty to do with children after all my years of teaching. I know a prodigy when I see one. I've talked to the principal and the other teachers and they are as impressed as I am. I heard about him from his first-grade teacher—you know she rents a room at my house. He

learned to read and write in a matter of *hours*! Then they put him in the second grade. He breezed right through that! And the third! And the fourth! Now he's taking eighth-grade subjects and he's at the top of the class. *Right* here in Bigfield we have a future Einstein!"

Damn Mindy! Ralph thought. Couldn't resist showing off. Too dumb to play dumb.

"An Einstein," Mrs. Smith repeated, "and we've got to do something about it."

"Do what?" Ralph demanded.

"A great mind belongs to the *world*. It should be guarded, nurtured, encouraged. You know the old adage about the light under the bushel or is it pearls before swine?" Mrs. Smith stopped in embarrassment. "I'm so excited I'm forgetting my manners. I don't mean to say that the Pilchers are swine. Not at all. But certainly they are not the ones to have charge of such a treasure. Mindy must be taken away from his parents!"

"Now wait a minute, Mrs. Smith," Ralph said, "you can't . . . you can't . . ." He looked at Leila in desperation.

"Unless you have cause, Mrs. Smith," Leila stated quietly, "you can't take a child away from his parents."

"Cause! We *have* cause! Neglect, cruelty. You saw how they acted about that cigar. And he's still smoking! No, we haven't caught him at it, but we smell it on his breath. If that isn't cruelty! Letting all that nicotine seep into the child's system. It will stunt his growth. And his morals! He's a mental giant, but when it comes to morals, he's . . . he's a dwarf. That's what he is, a dwarf! And do you know what? He gambles! Yes, he has some kind of a game with walnut shells and a pea and he's winning all the children's *lunch* money. It's certainly cruel and neglectful to let a child grow up a gambler. Aside from the fact that the other children have no money for lunches. The principal says

their grades are going down, too. All educators know there is a definite correlation between food intake and mental effort."

She rattled on, "Now my suggestion is that we get the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children on the case. But first we are going to take Mindy over to the state university and have the psychology department give him a series of mental tests and then on the basis of those tests . . ."

"Now wait a minute, Mrs. Smith," Ralph interrupted, "you can't take Mindy anywhere without his parents' permission."

"Why not?"

"Because parents have legal control of their children! Before you take him to the university you must consult with the Pilchers and get their permission."

"Why should they refuse? We may be able to get a scholarship for him, free tuition at Harvard! If the Pilchers say 'No,' we can always get a court order . . ."

"You'll be in court yourself if you aren't careful. The Pilchers will sue you for kidnapping!"

Mr. Carr said, "Mr. Bayless is right, Venice. You shouldn't go off half-cocked. No harm to take things a little slow."

"And let a future Einstein ruin his health smoking cigars and his character playing that horrible walnut shell game. And there's something else. It's embarrassing to talk about it but I feel I must. It's his *voice*. It's changing. Already! Every once in a while it goes deep, deep, like this." Her voice went down into her chest. "He's having a precocious puberty, that's what he's having. So we should get medical advice. A doctor might be able to do something to stop it. Give him shots to slow him up. Or we might raise a fund and send him to Rochester, to the Mayo Clinic and . . ."

Ralph couldn't help it. He burst out laughing. He saw Leila's shoulders were shaking, too.

Mrs. Smith said severely, "I don't see anything funny in the situation, Mr. Bayless."

Ralph got control of himself and said, "Mrs. Smith, I appreciate your concern and your good intentions but I must reiterate: You can't do anything about Mindy without the Pilchers' consent."

Venice Smith's lower lip thrust out; she looked rebellious.

"I should think," Ralph went on, "that the school authorities could stop his gambling. The rest of the children ought to have their lunches."

"Maybe we can handle that in another way," Mr. Carr suggested smoothly. "For a long time Venice has had a school lunch project, to have food served hot right at the school and for free. We've never been able to put it over. But the way business is picking up around here lately maybe we could get the hot lunch deal going. Then the kids don't need any lunch money, so Mindy can't win it. What do you say to that, Venice?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "I know what you're doing, Sam. You're waving a carrot in front of my nose. All right, I'll retire for *now*. But *only* for now. A great mind belongs to the world, as I said before, and that pearl is too important to be left under a bushel."

There was a general conference in the clubroom at Pearl. Mindy admitted he'd been dumb not to play dumb. "But I got so damn bored," he told them. "I just wanted a little excitement. And, boy, did their eyes bug out when I read those books a mile a minute and did all those arithmetic problems!"

"I think," said Ralph, "you've been overplaying your hand."

"Honest? Okay, then I go dumb. Starting tomorrow, I'm dumb like an ox."

"It will look very strange for you to change all of a sudden," Leila warned.

"You'll stay a genius," Ralph ordered. "At least for a while. When you go dumb, you'll do it gradually."

Mindy took several puffs on his cigar and said, "Sorry, but I'll have to do it all of a sudden. They're springing algebra on me tomorrow and I never had no algebra."

Mrs. Pilcher scolded, "It wasn't very nice of you, Mindy, to take the children's lunch money."

"Yes," Walt agreed, "you shouldn't pick on kids."

Mindy shrugged his shoulders. "You know what Bar-num said. Never give a sucker a break. He didn't give no age limit. A sucker's a sucker."

"You've got to stop it," Ralph told him.

"And cut myself off from that nice gravy!" Mindy jingled the coins in his pocket. "It adds up even in nickels and dimes. You folks gotta realize I'm getting a tough deal. Only kids to talk to, having to sneak my smokes. And I mean sneak, with those teachers and Mrs. Smith on my tail. Gosh, a guy's got no privacy at all. That Smith woman follows me right into the Gent's. And . . ." his voice went up ". . . it's a helluva strain talking soprano all the whole day long. A few times I've slipped."

"Yes," said Ralph drily, "we heard about that, too."

Mindy chuckled. "Now I'm learning the facts of life. One day after I'm talking deep the principal takes me into her office and she gives me this song and dance about the bees and the flowers. And how it's the same with human beings, they flower, too, only sometimes they flower too soon, and that's what's happening to me." He chuckled again. "If they only know!"

"It's not so funny as you think," Ralph said. "Mrs. Smith thinks you should see a doctor and get medical treatment to *stop* that flowering."

"Stop that . . ." Mindy took the cigar out of his mouth and stared at them in consternation. "You mean they're planning . . . You mean a doctor . . . Say, I gotta scam! I gotta get the hell out of here!"

"Now calm down, Mindy," Ralph told him. "Nobody's going to do anything to you. Parents have the say-so about their children and that means the Pilchers say yes or no to any plan."

Mindy looked at Mr. Pilcher warily. "You wouldn't play no tricks on me, would you?" He paced up and down the room with his short, jerky strides. "No, honest, folks, I gotta scam."

"You scam," said Ralph, "and there'll be a hue and cry about your being kidnapped."

"Well, then I'll tell them my real age."

"And send us all to jail!"

"Why'll *you* go to jail?"

"For fraud, conspiracy, taking the taxpayers' money on false pretences. We got the road built because you were the eighth child. If you're not the eighth child . . ."

"Then we're all behind the eight ball," Uncle Rollo chipped in.

"No kidding, Mindy," Ralph went on, "you've got to stick it out. Remember how you stuck it in those bombers, putting in the rivets? Where's your spirit of '76?"

"Sure, sure, but the rivets were for the U.S.A." Mindy puffed furiously on the last of his cigar. "Sure, sure, the cause! Dear old Pearl! I know about the college boys. They'll die for dear old Rutgers. But I'm not going to be nipped in the bud even for dear old Pearl!"

Ralph said, "Nobody's going to nip you, Mindy. Nobody."

He looked around at them. "Cross your hearts, everybody, and promise."

Solemnly they crossed their hearts.

"Okay, I carry on." The little fellow made a gesture as if lifting up a banner. "For Pearl!" And then changing into his soprano tone. "For Pearl!"

"Now," said Ralph, "since that problem's settled, let's tackle the next. I think Mr. Carr . . ."

But he never finished his sentence for suddenly the door flew open and there stood Nibs looking grim and purposeful and beside him Mrs. Beach, purple in the face and panting for breath.

Nibs led her to a chair and eased her into it. Then he began to fan her vigorously with a big Manila envelope he had in his hand.

"I told her it was too much for her to walk up here. She wouldn't let me come and get you."

Mrs. Beach lifted her arm and pointed at Ralph, trying to say something.

"Take it easy now, Edie," Walt advised her, "whatever's upset you, it can wait."

"Smoke," Mrs. Beach got out, "smoke . . ."

"Is something burning?" Leila cried.

"No," said Nibs. "She means she sent up her smoke signal and nobody came."

"But we were in Bigfield," Ralph said, "and I guess the others didn't see it."

"I don't watch no more," said Walt. "She's always here."

Gradually the colour in Mrs. Beach's face faded, from purple to red, to pink, and her breathing calmed down. "The picture," she said to Nibs.

Nibs tore open the Manila envelope. He drew out a large glossy photograph and held it up for all to see. It was the one Ralph had snapped of the beautiful rumps of the beautiful twins.

"It can't be!" Leila cried. "It can't be!" She looked wildly at Ralph. "You saw me tear it up. 'You *saw* me!'"

"It came from Paris," Nibs told them. "Hubert sent it. Somebody sent it to him." He reached again into the Manila envelope and drew out a sheet of paper. "Hubert says—among other things—that he's cancelled his boat reservation, and he's *flying* home!"

16

Photographer Pease held up the film to the light. "Yes, I see what you mean. Not a very pretty pose. You say a print of this was sent to Hubert?"

"In Paris. And it must have been sent from this very shop."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Well," Ralph told him, "we tore up the print we got. So an extra print must have been made here. And somebody who wanted to make trouble sent it to Hubert."

"I didn't send it."

"The print didn't *walk* to Paris, did it?"

"No, it didn't walk." He turned to the back of the shop and yelled, "Egger."

"Egger! Does *he* work here?"

"The son does. Let's see what he knows about this."

"Now it's all very clear," Ralph said to Leila.

A tall, stoop-shouldered lad poked through the door. He was a younger edition of his father.

Pease handed him the film. "How many prints did you make of this?"

Egger looked at it and sniggered. "One. That's what they ordered."

"Another print," Ralph said, "went to Mrs. Beach's son in Paris."

"I only made one." Sniggering again, young Egger handed the film to Pease, then turned and went through the door.

Pease shrugged his shoulders. "You say he did, he says he didn't. Your word against his."

"And my word, too," said Leila. "I tore up that other print myself."

"Two prints were made," Pease admitted. "But if young Egger says he didn't do it, well, what can I do? Bring in the FBI? Why did you take the picture anyway?"

"I wish I hadn't. But I had the camera in my hand and, click! I took it. You're a photographer."

"Yes . . . I know."

"Obviously young Egger was put up to it by old Egger. So now Hubert's coming home and things are in a hell of a mess!"

Leila said, "I'm wondering . . . do you suppose any other prints were made, sent to newspapers?"

"There's no way of telling," Pease answered.

"Well," said Ralph, taking the film out of his hand, "no more prints are going to be made from *this*." He tore the film into strips and threw them in the waste basket.

"I'm sorry," Pease said.

"So are we!" Ralph told him. "Come on, Leila. Let's go over and see Carr about this."

Mr. Carr received them cordially. He didn't seem at all worried over Hubert's homecoming.

"If he'd come a little sooner maybe he could have hurt us. But now we're set. What can Hubert do?"

"He can make his mother withdraw her support."

"Well, now, will he? He wouldn't want her to bring home that statue, or all those old relics in the museum."

"Suppose he makes her stop giving those talks in the graveyard and singing those songs on Friday and Saturday nights."

"And there's Fernando and Nibs," Leila added, "and all the food she sends over."

"And a certain amount of . . . er . . . financial support," Mr. Carr put in quietly, "which is, of course, important to you." Very slightly he stressed the "you". "But," he continued, "it seems to me that since Pearl is doing so well, that if Mrs. Beach's financial help's withdrawn, then you too should be paid from the general fund, just as the others are." He didn't pursue this any further but cleared his throat and said, "Bigfield will carry on in spite of everything. In spite of Hubert, in spite of Egger."

"Why is that Egger so against us?" Ralph asked.

"He's against everything that takes any effort. Besides he's had to take a back seat lately. Then, too, he's got a lot of mining claims around Pearl. So he keeps hoping some mining company will come in here. But don't worry about Egger. If he . . ."

The telephone rang and Carr picked up the receiver. "Howdy," he said into the mouthpiece. As he listened, a big grin spread over his face. "I'll be there," he promised.

"My lawyer," he told them, as he hung up. "Today we're closing the new hotel deal. I've got to hustle out and sign the papers." He stood up and patted them both on the back. "This whole Pearl deal has been terrific. If I read about it in a book I'd say, 'Baloney!' But I'm not reading a book, it's happening right before my eyes.

And don't think I don't know who's put it over! Come along, walk with me as far as my lawyer's."

Just before the lawyer's they passed a small bar. Carr suddenly steered them into it. "I'm going to buy you a drink," he said. "Fred," he called to the bartender, "give these friends of mine some refreshment. All they want. Oh, well, stop before they're blind drunk. And put it on my bill. So long, you two. Keep your chins up. Don't worry. It's our Pearl!"

"Have a booth, folks," the bartender invited. "What'll it be?"

"Do you think you should?". Leila asked as they slid into the seats. "Have liquor on your breath when you talk to Hubert?"

"Liquor on my breath, courage in my heart. A double bourbon on the rocks," he said to Fred.

"And the lady?"

"Nothing for me," she answered.

Fred brought the whiskey to the table. Ralph took a swallow and said, "Don't look so disapproving, Leila."

"You're meeting him for the first time. Suppose your tongue is thick."

"On one drink!"

"It's not one drink, it's two. A double bourbon. Even in *one* glass it's still *two* drinks."

"Leila, right now you look just like an accountant. In fact I think in your soul you *are* an accountant." He put down his glass and stared at her. "I'm trying to remember."

"Remember what?"

"How you look when you smile."

Suddenly she did smile and she said, "You're right. I'll have a drink."

"Leila!"

"What should it be? A single bourbon?"

"I think you'd like an old-fashioned." He called to the bartender, "The lady's changed her mind. An old-fashioned, and put in plenty of that cherry syrup." He grinned at her. "Well, well, Leila, this is a red-letter day. How did it ever happen?"

"It suddenly came over me. I *am* too prim and proper. It's time I changed."

Fred served her the drink and after she'd tasted it, she said in surprise, "Why, it's good!"

"Take it slow," Ralph advised, "so it doesn't go to your head."

"It won't really make me drunk, will it? One drink?"

"No, Leila, but if it does, I'll carry you out."

After he'd met Hubert, Ralph thought Mrs. Beach was right. They *had* switched babies on her at the hospital. Hubert was not in the least like his mother. Rather on the fat side, handsome in a cold fish sort of way, he reminded Ralph of nothing so much as a Roman emperor with dyspepsia.

It was as an emperor giving an audience that he received them. Barely acknowledging Nib's introductions he eyed them for at least a minute with a narrow-lidded, measuring stare.

"Well, Hubert," quavered Mrs. Beach, looking ill at ease and not at all like her usual self, "can't we at least sit down?"

"Not there, Mother," he ordered, as she started to lower herself into an arm chair.

Obediently the old lady straightened up and went and sat where he indicated, in a tall, stiff chair by the fireplace.

"You, Mr. . . . ah . . . Bailey, over there."

"Bayless," Ralph corrected him, and sat down on an unupholstered bench.

"Miss Page . . . here."

Leila looked at him defiantly and shook her head. "No, Mr. Beach. I prefer to *stand*." Very deliberately she walked over to the mantelpiece and leaned against it.

Hubert frowned at her, and for a minute Ralph thought the man was going to seize and thrust her bodily into a chair, and he hoped Hubert would try it. Because he felt quite ready for a physical tussle with this cold fish.

But Hubert turned away from Leila to Nibs. Nibs didn't wait to be ordered into something uncomfortable. He pulled out the piano stool and perched himself on that.

Hubert still standing, surveyed them with his steely glare. "My mother, it seems, has picked up a couple of strangers . . ."

"Mr. Beach," Leila broke in sharply. He stared at her in surprise. Obviously Hubert was not used to being interrupted. "Mr. Beach," she repeated, in an even sharper tone, "I resent the phrase, 'picked up', and I object to the word, 'strangers'. We were not picked up, we were not strangers. We were formally introduced by Mr. Stauffer . . ."

"That old . . ."

Leila left the mantelpiece and came over to him. "Your mother," she informed Hubert, "invited us to dinner. By smoke signals. If there'd been a mail delivery to Pearl, no doubt she would have sent us formal invitations. Since there was no mail delivery, she did it by smoke. She smoked us out. As Uncle Rollo would say, 'Ha-ha, that's good'. You do not know Uncle Rollo as yet, but you will."

Great Caesar! thought Ralph. On one old-fashioned!

"So we were *not* picked up," Leila rattled on, "and we were *not* strangers. I want that thoroughly understood!" With great dignity she walked back to the mantelpiece and took her former pose. "Now," she said graciously, "you may continue with what you started to say."

Hubert, disconcerted by the unexpected attack, looked around a little blankly.

Lost his lines, Ralph thought, and the poor dope can't improvise. So he threw the lines to him.

"You feel, Mr. Beach, that we have taken advantage of your mother?"

"Most assuredly I do. Not only of her, but of me, and of the memory of my grandfather. That vulgar picture . . ."

Leila came rushing into the act again. "That picture was a *mistake*. Are you a photographer, Mr. Beach? If you are, you'll understand. You have a camera in your hand and, click, you've taken a picture. When we saw the print we knew it shouldn't be seen. We tore it up. But that Egger person, for reasons of his own, and being a son of . . ."

"Leila!" cried Ralph.

" . . . the father that he is, acts in typical Egger fashion. Egger, senior, is a small man of large ego. He wants to have the spotlight every minute, wants all the eggs in his own particular basket . . . Egger eggs, quoting Uncle Rollo, that's good. So the Eggers . . ."

"Has she had a drink?" Nibs whispered to Ralph.

"One old-fashioned."

"One!"

"One."

" . . . send you that picture to Paris and you feel you must come home. And didn't you hate to leave Paris? It's a beautiful city. isn't it?"

"I didn't leave Paris to come here and discuss it! I came to discuss Pearl and what you've done to my mother."

"Yes," smiled Leila, "haven't we done wonders? Doesn't she look fine? Really Pearl has given her a new lease on life."

"You've got her sitting out in that graveyard," Hubert broke through, "sitting under that umbrella . . ."

"Yes, you're right, the umbrella is wrong, all wrong. It's an . . . an . . . anachronism. We shouldn't have her under an umbrella, we should have her under a little *ramada*, like those squaws on the road to Santa Fe. I'm so glad you thought of it."

Hubert continued, "You've got her singing . . ."

"And she brings down the house. Did she sing those songs to you when you were a baby?"

"I sang him lullabies," said Mrs. Beach speaking for the first time, and very softly she began to warble, "Sleep, my little one . . ."

"I take it," cried Hubert, "that my mother does *not* sing lullabies at those brawls."

"Oh, no, she doesn't. But, Mr. Beach, nobody wants lullabies when they're drinking beer. Or do they? Mr. Beach, maybe you've got something there. At the very end a lullaby. Soft and weepy and sentimental. Like 'Good Night, Sweetheart' at the dances. Why, Mr. Beach, that's a wonderful idea. But you used the *wrong* word about our entertainment. We don't have brawls at Pearl. We have . . . we have . . . *soirees*! Like in Paris. And we're so lucky in our waitresses. Just as Mr. Bayless said, make it snooty enough, and the local debts will fight to serve at our tables. And they do. The list of our waitresses would make . . ." She appealed to Ralph. "That book in England with the lords and ladies?"

"Burke's Peerage," he told her.

"That's it, Burke's Peerage. Think of it, Mr. Beach, the list of our waitresses is the Burke's Peerage of this part of the state. You must come over and meet them."

"Miss Page," shouted Hubert in a tremendous voice, "I can't discuss . . ."

"You're right, you can't. Pearl can't be discussed. It has to be *seen*. It's a piece of Americana, an old ghost town being brought back in all its rip-roaring authenticity, right down to the last rip."

Now she's speaking my lines, Ralph told himself.

"It's not only the historical contribution and the pleasure and enlightenment it gives to people from all over the country and from all over the world . . ."

"We'll dispense with the history," Hubert ordered. "My concern is that you have taken money from my mother in the sum of . . ."

"I've got it all down," Nibs broke in. "It wasn't so much and it was out of income. You said, keep her amused. I thought the Pearl deal was a good way to let her have some fun and we got all that junk . . . I mean we got all the Pearlina moved to Pearl, and that's where it should be and it looks pretty good there, too. Sure, these folks got a few checks . . ."

Leila was talking again. "You'll probably want to change that, Mr. Beach."

"Most assuredly I'll change it."

"Because I don't think the cheques should come to us direct. They should go to the Pearl Foundation and then to us. And we must decide just what kind of a foundation we are. A foundation is everything. And that's good, too, although you men may not get it. We *must* organize ourselves on the right basis and get the tax situation figured out. Otherwise we're going to be in trouble with the government. The original set up has to be right and the

way we set up the books has to be right. I'm sure you appreciate how important that is. And I'm convinced that we will be in a better position, tax-wise, if the work we are doing is done as a community project than if it is done by a family."

Hubert pounced on the last word. "Family!" he cried. "I've heard about this family, these Rockefellers, Fords, these Guggenheims."

"I merely *mentioned* those names," Ralph said. "I did *not* say they were backing Pearl. That was assumed."

"Well, *who* is this family, if there *is* a family?"

"The family I had in mind is named Beach."

"Beach! You mean you thought *this* family would put millions into your scheme?"

"I never mentioned millions. That was also assumed. My words were, 'If a certain amount of preliminary work is done at Pearl, it is reasonable to expect certain sums to be forthcoming!'"

"And they forthcame," said Leila. "Our cheques every month from your mother and the food she donated to our snack bar. And the mileage on the car, and Nibs' services and Fernando's. I've got it all down in my books. If I do say so myself I've kept met . . . meticulous records. Everything's down. Every last thing. Even Teenie's bird seed. Teenie is a canary," she explained carefully.

"I'm not interested in canaries," thundered Hubert. "What I'm interested in is . . ."

"Pearl itself," Leila finished for him. "Of course! Of course, you're anxious to see Pearl. So come tomorrow. Tomorrow's Saturday, our big day and night. Stay for dinner, see our show. You *will* come?" she begged.

"I will come," promised Hubert Beach grimly.

17

Red velvet carpet and rose petals for the Roman Emperor. Ralph had seen to it that Hubert had the best table for the show, a large one right down in front of the stage. The Carrs were sitting with him because this was their day to be host and hostess. Mrs. Carr looked fetching in her hoop-skirted costume, but Mr. Carr was miserable, hot and perspiring in his heavy wool suit and half strangled by a too-tight high collar.

Uncle Rollo and Mr. Pilcher had joined them. Mr. Pilcher was wearing his cowboy clothes, waiting to go on with Fernando. And Suzie May, too, fully clothed for 'once' in a skirt and blouse. She had sprained her ankle that morning and her nose was now completely out of joint because Leila was up there on the stage instead of her.

It was hard for Ralph to believe what he was seeing. Leila dancing the can-can! And dancing it very well. She didn't have the twins' buxom curves nor Suzie May's come-hither. But as she pranced about in the hastily altered costume, and twirled and flipped, she was *cute*. Decidedly cute, Ralph told himself, and who would have ever thought it? For she had tried to beg off from dancing with Donaldine. But Ralph had held her to her promise. And there she was, dancing the can-can. And Roman Emperor Hubert, tapping his beer mug on the table, had not only lost his look of dyspepsia, he almost didn't look like a Roman Emperor.

Hubert had come to Pearl early that morning and the day had gone, Ralph reflected, both well, and not so well. Hubert had liked the graveyard. He thought his grand-

father looked dignified and impressive up on his pedestal, and as he stood by listening to the stories his mother told to visitors, he admitted that they were rather interesting.

The museum he thought was excellent, he liked the rehabilitated old stores. But he refused to see Walt's gold-panning pool. "I do not approve of that worthless old man and would prefer to stay as far away from him as possible." After this remark Ralph hastily arranged that Uncle Rollo, not Walt, should give the spiel that day in the skeleton cave.

Sally was a disappointment. She declined to say, "How do you do," to Hubert. Hubert looked down his nose and said it was quite immaterial to him whether the little . . . ah . . . canine greeted him or not.

Emily, too, was ungracious. Although she would shake hands with the children after their rides, she would not stretch out her hoof to Hubert. Walt, hovering at a distance, said, "Smart little burro!" and chuckled with satisfaction. Hubert observed that as far as he was concerned Emily was an ass, and why shake hands with one?

Hubert didn't stay very long in the skeleton cave. For one thing Teenie kept going to sleep and frightening the wits out of everybody. And for another, Uncle Rollo was not so good at spiefing as Walt. He was telling the version about the fleeing stage-robbers and their gold. It is an exciting story but he made it boring. Hubert said the cave was giving him claustrophobia, and he went outside.

"Shoulda had me doin' the talkin'," Walt said to Ralph.

But what really impressed the Roman Emperor was Leila's bookkeeping. She and Ralph took him to the club-room and there they spread out before him the contents of the filing cases, the ledgers, the card indexes, the big scrapbook. Hubert was amazed at how accurately and meticulously the accounts had been kept.

"Yes," said Ralph, "when it comes to figures, Leila has total recall."

"With figures," Hubert stated, "total recall is all-important." He turned back to Leila and discussed at length with her the tax problems, the advantages and disadvantages, of being a foundation or a private enterprise.

At one point Ralph asked if he didn't want to see some more of Pearl while there was still light. Hubert brought his long patrician nose out of the ledger and said, "What I want to know of Pearl is right here in these books. Miss Page and I will go over them together and come to some conclusion."

Knowing a dismissal when he heard one, Ralph had left them and wandered over to the Pilcher house where Suzie May was lolling on a couch, her ankle supported by a pillow. Suzie May stretched herself lazily and said, "Hi!"

"Hi," Ralph answered absentmindedly, not really hearing her.

Suzie May wriggled herself into an even more alluring pose. "You look s-o-o-o-o cross. Why?"

"Do I? I didn't realize it." He smiled in her direction. Actually Suzie May's beautiful curves were not registering with him. What he was seeing was Leila, her slim shoulder touching the Roman Emperor's, as the two of them sitting close together, bent over the books.

Leila and Donaldine had taken their final bows now. The clapping and shouting died down. Wellton Boys' Orchestra launched into "Margie." People began to dance.

Mr. Carr ran his finger around his neck and said to his wife, "I'd dance with you, Mother, but not in this collar."

"It's just as well," she told him. "I'm not too sure of my hoops. I'd hate to lose them on the floor. How *did* women wear so many clothes?"

"Clothes are stupid," Mr. Pilcher observed. "I could sing a helluva lot better without this ridiculous outfit I'm stuck with. In fact I got it figured out how I could get along without them. I'll make up like an Indian, see? Come out with a G-string and a feather head-dress. Then folks could see my figure! Brown paint'd be no harder to put on than the white I used to wear. Don't you see me as a naked Indian?" he said to Hubert.

"No," Hubert replied, "I do not."

"Well," said Mr. Pilcher somewhat nettled, "I don't see you as no Indian either. A Greek or Roman maybe but . . ."

Ralph kicked him under the table. It was decidedly not the time to discuss Hubert in the nude. "If you were an Indian," he broke in, "you'd sing Indian songs. Nothing but grunts."

"I'm still thinking," Hubert mused, "of Miss Page's figures. Remarkable!"

"Yes," Mr. Pilcher agreed. "She's put on weight. In the right places, too."

Hubert stared at him coldly. "My reference to figures was mathematical, not anatomical. I was referring to her accounts. A remarkable set of books."

"Figures," said Uncle Rollo. "He speaks of a lady's figures. In the plural. That I find singular." He laughed appreciatively. "Very good."

Suzie May leaned forward, giving Hubert the benefit of her heavy-lidded gaze. "I'm sorry you didn't see *me* dancing up there. It's much better when the two girls are the same size."

Hubert drew back with a little gesture of distaste. "Quite so. Are there any other dancers Miss Page's size?"

Suzie May wilted and Ralph felt sorry for her. He also wanted to kick Hubert in the teeth.

Leila came up to the table, a cape she had borrowed from Mrs. Pilcher wrapped around her. She was still flushed and breathless and her hair was tousled. She looked very pretty.

Ralph drew out a chair for her. "We've just had a wire from Hollywood. They want to sign you up."

"Your dance was charming," Hubert told her, and actually smiled. Then he turned to the whole table. "And Miss Page has done an extremely fine piece of work with her accounts. A talent in bookkeeping as well as in dancing. I do indeed find it remarkable."

"This whole Pearl deal is remarkable," Mr. Carr said. He winked slyly at Ralph. "You don't know how remarkable!" He waved his arm at the crowded floor. "Look at all those folks! Must be plenty in the till tonight."

"Best gate yet," Ralph told him.

"And we've done it all ourselves," Carr went on. "It's been our Pearl, and I think it should stay our Pearl. What do you say, Hubert? Why do we need some rich family coming in here and telling us what to do?"

"Why, indeed?" said Hubert coldly.

Mr. Carr's eyes suddenly focused on something in the distance. "For gosh sakes!" he cried.

It was Venice Smith, weaving her way through the dancers, heading purposefully towards their table.

"But it's not Venice's night," said Mrs. Carr, "and she hasn't on her costume."

"I've spent the whole day at state college," Mrs. Smith said breathlessly, scarcely acknowledging their greetings, "and when I got home I just couldn't go to bed. I had to talk to somebody and I knew you'd all be out here."

She paused for a couple of deep breaths. "And what do you suppose I found just outside the door? I might

have known it! And when I saw that red glow, so close to the ground I did know it. Mindy! Smoking a cigar! I took it away from him, and I sent him home to bed. 'If you don't go there,' I said, 'I'll go with you and put you to bed myself.'" She turned accusingly on Mr. Pilcher. "What kind of a parent *are* you, to let him smoke like that?"

"Can't watch him every minute," mumbled Mr. Pilcher, putting his face in his mug.

"Well, if not you, what about the rest of the family? His mother is busy at the snack bar, I know, but you," she pointed her finger at Uncle Rollo, "what about you? That *dog* can't take up all your time. Why can't you watch Mindy?"

"Sally *does* take up most of my time," answered Uncle Rollo defensively, "and anyway those cigars don't seem to hurt him."

"And you," Venice Smith said to Suzie May, "you're *big* enough to take some responsibility. You ought to be with your little brother right now, undressing him and putting him to bed."

"Usually I'm dancing at this time," Suzie May told her, "and tonight I want to watch the show."

"Girls!" Mrs. Smith snorted. "Utterly feckless these days. Feckless!"

"And what did you do at the state university?" Ralph asked quickly to change the subject.

"Yes, that's what I came out here to tell you. I went to this lecture on the gifted child. By Professor Lewin—he's world famous—and Professor Lewin says that society is neglecting its gifted children, neglecting them shamefully.

"Professor Lewin told us how we carry along the misfits, the crippled, blind, spastic, dumb, hard of hearing, feeble-minded, but we neglect the *gifted*. We don't train

them to their full capacity and so the nation suffers an incalculable loss in human resources. Your son is a gifted child, Mr. Pilcher, and you've got to do something about him."

Mr. Pilcher put down his mug. "Now see nere, Mrs. Smith . . ."

"But before you do anything at all you must, you positively must take him to an endocrinologist."

"A what?"

"An endocrinologist. Gland specialist. Because just now when I took his cigar away from him your son's voice wasn't a child's voice at all. It was the voice of a *man*. I was more worried about the deepness than the words he used, vile words. Words I didn't even *know*."

"If you didn't know the words," asked Uncle Rollo quietly, "how did you know they were vile?"

"They were vile all right. I could tell by the way he said them. Where does he learn such words? Does he hear that kind of talk at home, Mr. Pilcher?"

"He certainly doesn't."

"Then he is getting it from evil companions; his mind is being poisoned."

"I know where's he's learning those words," Mr. Pilcher told her. "He's learning them at *school*. All right, I'll take him out of school."

"No, Mr. Pilcher, we have nice children at Bigfield, and you can't take Mindy out of school. The truant officer wouldn't let you. But it's not *what* he says, although that's bad enough, it's that *deep* tone. He's got to have medical help and right away. His whole future may be at stake. Miss Page, Mr. Beach, you two are intelligent people"—her tone implied that the others weren't—"don't you agree that one gifted child is worth hundreds, thousands, of feeble-minded?"

"Why, yes, of course," said Leila.

"Look what we've put into this project, the rehabilitation of Pearl, the time, money, energy. But Pearl is the past. A gifted child is the future, which is infinitely more important. Mr. Beach, don't you agree?"

The Roman Emperor nodded his head. "I agree, Mrs. Smith, that a gifted child is important."

"He is! He is! And now . . ." She leaned forward and her whole face was beaming. "I have the most wonderful news for you, the most wonderful thing has happened. After the lecture I talked for a long time with Professor Lewin and . . ." She paused and put her hand on Mr. Pilcher's arm. "Professor Lewin wants to meet Mindy, he wants to meet you and Mrs. Pilcher. He and his wife are looking for a child to adopt. They think they want to adopt Mindy. Just imagine what that would mean! Just imagine!"

You could have heard a pin drop around the table. "Just imagine!" Ralph said hollowly, and to himself, The damn silly woman! Here she goes upsetting the apple cart.

Mr. Pilcher pounded the table with his beer mug. "Mrs. Smith, once and for all, Mindy is *not* going to be adopted. And he's *not* going to meet that professor and he's *not* going to see that endo . . . endo . . . that doctor. And I say . . . well, I say *mind* your *own* business, Mrs. Smith, and I'll mind mine." He got to his feet. "Now I've got to go up on that stage and sing and I don't feel like singing after all this." He started to stride away but turned back and said, "I don't give one hoot how much he smokes, Mrs. Smith, and I don't give one damn how deep he talks. Do you understand?"

"Well!" cried Venice Smith. "Did you ever?"

"No, Venice," said Sam Carr, "I never did. As a bull in a China shop you sure enough take the number-one

blue ribbon. You come busting in here and tell a man who's quietly drinking his beer that you want to take his child . . ."

"Not me! Professor Lewin, a world-famous professor. Think of all the advantages Mindy would have: a beautiful home, music, intellectual conversation, everything! I've got my teeth into this, Sam Carr. I'm not letting go."

"Even though you tear the child to pieces?"

"It's for his own good and for the good of the *world*. His parents will just have to make the sacrifice."

Uncle Rollo said meaningly, "You know, Mindy's aunt, our sister, lives in Florida. She's been wanting him to visit her for a long time. I think this might be just the time for him to make that visit. And besides, the youngest Miranda child is about six now."

"There are the courts," said Venice Smith ominously. "And what's the Miranda child got to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing," said Uncle Rollo casually. "Just one of my asides."

"Mindy isn't in the right environment with his present family. Steps must be taken!"

Mr. Carr said, "Venice, get wise to yourself! No court in the world is going to take a child away from his parents even if he is an Einstein."

"And speaking of Einstein," Ralpn asked, "how is Mindy doing in algebra?"

Mrs. Smith looked a little startled. "It's strange you should ask that, because he's having a difficult time. He's learned everything else so quickly."

"Maybe he's a genius just up to the eighth grade."

"That's genius enough for the present. If his mind is given the proper encouragement, if he's put in the proper environment. How *could* one family have such different children? Beauty in the girls. Brains in the boy."

"Who said I didn't have brains?" demanded Suzie May looking belligerent.

On the stage Mr. Pilcher and Fernando walked out. "Oh, that strawberry roan," Fernando began in his heartbreakingly sweet voice.

"Golly," sighed Suzie May blissfully, "how he can sing! But I sure wish he was taller."

After Fernando and Mr. Pilcher there was more social dancing on the floor and then came the evening's high-light, Mrs. Beach. They pushed out the little organ. Mrs. Beach made her entrance to a crash of applause. She stood there kissing her hands to the audience. In spite of her ravaged old face she was an enchanting little thing with her bright gold hair and her hour-glass figure.

Then she sat down and played, the meanwhile singing to her own accompaniment. As always, Ralph marvelled at how she put herself over. She had a cracked, hoarse voice, sometimes she wasn't even on key, but she had that "something", she "projected". One reason of course was that she was having so much fun herself. "Empathy," that was the word, Ralph thought. She and her listeners were in complete rapport. Soon the audience was singing with her, it was almost as if they were singing to her.

At last she said, "Thank you, my dears, thank you very much. You've sung to me and now I'll sing to you, something to take home with you, to give you pleasant dreams." She began "Go to Sleep, You Little Baby," singing it very softly, looking down and smiling. It was almost as if a child were in a cradle beside her.

When she had finished there was complete silence for several moments and then an outburst of applause and shouting. So she sang the lullaby once again, even more softly. Ralph felt a stinging behind his eyelids, and glanced at Hubert. If the old so-and-so wasn't affected by this!

But when the lights went up, Hubert's face was still cold and austere, even though there were tears on Leila's cheeks and Mrs. Carr was sniffing.

Hubert said to Leila, "Mother's good, isn't she? I'm just wondering, in regard to our tax situation, if it wouldn't ameliorate matters to put her on a salary. It is something to be discussed."

Leila, wiping her eyes, looked at him in amazement and said, "Why, yes, it is."

"Perhaps at the present moment." He got stiffly to his feet and bowing slightly said, "Miss Page, it would give me great pleasure to escort you to your dwelling."

Leila's jaw dropped and after a moment she said, "Yes, indeed, Mr. Beach. It's very kind of you."

"I bid you all good night," Hubert said to the others. "Mrs. Smith, I agree with you that a great intellect should be saved for the world. We will discuss this child in the near future."

As they left Suzie May said to their departing backs, "Two of a kind. Two cold fish."

"Oh, now, Suzie May," Ralph scolded her, "I wouldn't say that. Not *two* cold fish."

"Two," she insisted, and stood up herself. Then she hastily sat down. "My ankle! I've twisted it again. How will I ever get home?"

There was only her father, mother, sister, uncle, and Fernando to help her. But Ralph, summoning up his gallantry, jumped to his feet and bowed in imitation of Hubert. "Miss Pilcher, it would give me great pleasure to escort you to your dwelling."

Half way to High Pearl Suzie May said she had to rest.

"We could," she suggested, "go down to that little ledge and look at the moon."

"You don't think climbing over those rocks will be too much of a strain on your ankle?"

"Oh, no. And besides, you'll be helping me."

And so they sat with their backs braced against a rock and watched the moon, incredibly large and bright, sail across the sky. Ralph wondered if Leila and Hubert were seeing it, too, sitting on the bench outside the duplex.

"Leila's skinny," said Suzie May abruptly. "She'll never have a really nice figure. I wish you'd seen me posing in our statue act."

"Suzie May, I've seen you over and over again with practically nothing on. I *know* you've got a nice figure. But Leila's figure is all right, too. You're Juno, she's Dian?"

"If I were a man," Suzie May went on relentlessly, "I couldn't love a woman who was skinny."

"My dear girl, you don't love a woman just for her figure."

"What do you love her for then?"

"Her mind, charm, come-hither, because she laughs at the same jokes. For any number of reasons. The figure is the least of it."

Suzie May turned to him and in the moonlight her face was beautiful and yearning.

He said regretfully, "If you were only a few years older, young lady. . . ."

"Oh, Ralph!" Suddenly her arms were tight around his neck and she was kissing him violently on the lips. The rock he was braced against tilted, he lost his balance, and the force of her weight threw him backwards into the dirt. Some little bush with sharp thorns began to dig into his flesh. Her arm across his Adam's apple was choking off his wind.

"S-s-suzie May," he got out between her kisses, "stop! I can't breathe!"

But Suzie May only clutched the tighter, crying, "I love you, I love you." More kisses. "And you love that skinny Leila." Kisses again. "Nothing but bones." And still more kisses. "When here I am . . ." Her powerful arms were squeezing him tighter and tighter.

My God, thought Ralph, she'll choke me to death! With a violent wrench he broke free from her and rolled away to a safe distance.

"For God's sake, Suzie May!" He lay panting in the dirt, getting back his wind, feeling utterly ridiculous. "Didn't anyone ever tell you to let the *man* make the advances?"

"But you wouldn't make them," she cried. "I waited and waited and you *wouldn't* make them. What can I do if the *man* won't make the advances?"

"In that case, my dear girl, you cross the man off your list and go out after other game." He got up and dusted himself off. "What about Fernando? He's nuts about you."

"He's too small. Why can't *you* love me," she wailed, "why *can't* you?"

"Suzie May, aside from the fact that I'm old enough to be your father, almost, there's another factor that would prevent my loving you."

"What?"

"You're too damn strong." He rubbed his throat. "You've bruised my windpipe. I can hardly swallow."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, I'll probably recover. Come on now, let's go home."

She got up, avoiding his helping hand, and striding ahead of him, climbed up to the path.

"Suzie May, wait! Your ankle!"

But she paid no attention to him. Instead she ran up the path, scarcely limping at all.

He followed slowly, rubbing his throat. He hoped she hadn't broken any bones.

There was only one figure sitting on the bench in front of the duplex. It was Leila, wrapped in her cape. Ralph sat down beside her.

"Your escort didn't stay long."

"He said he likes to get eight hours' sleep."

"Careful of his health, is he?"

"Yes. And this will surprise you. I think he's going to offer me a job."

"Doing what, for the love of Mike?"

"An accounting job with his company. He didn't actually offer it, but he beat all around the bush about it."

"Well, you tell him to go climb a tree."

Suddenly she giggled.

"What's so funny?"

"Hubert and his mother's song. That lovely lullaby and all he could think of was getting her on a salary. You say I have the soul of an accountant. Only I haven't, not really. But *he* has that kind of a soul."

"I'm glad."

"Why?"

"I mean I'm glad you think he has that kind of a soul. Because I was jealous when you went home with him."

"You, jealous!"

"Me, jealous. And what does that add up to, do you think?"

"I don't know," she said softly. "And I was jealous, too."

"Oh. Of whom?"

"Of Suzie May. When you didn't come back, I thought you were with her. And then she came along by herself and I knew you weren't with her. So then I wasn't jealous."

"Leila!" He had her in his arms. She was warm and yielding and her shoulders were white in the moonlight as the cape fell away.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, too."

He gazed down at her, not kissing her, waiting, savouring the moment. Suddenly her eyes widened in horror and disbelief. She tore herself away from him.

"How *could* you? How *could* you? Your face! It's covered with lipstick! You *were* with Suzie May. You were!" She whirled and ran into the house.

"Leila!" he cried, running after her down the hall to her bedroom. But she closed and locked the door and he heard the chest being moved against it.

"Leila! As I said once before, I don't break down doors. Now come out here and let me explain."

There was only silence on the other side of the door.

"Believe it or not, I didn't kiss her, *she* kissed me."

"I suppose," Leila said coldly, "she overpowered you and kissed you against your will."

He couldn't help laughing; it was so exactly the truth. "That's just what she did. Leila, darling, come out here."

"Go away," she cried. "I hate you."

"Oh, hell!" he said, and walked outside where he sat down again on the bench. He was furiously angry, at himself, at Leila, at the whole situation. He damn well felt like breaking down that door. If he could have Leila in his arms again . . . But it was a heavy door. It wouldn't break down easily.

Suddenly he thought of the window. Smash the glass, reach in and turn the catch. He could slide up the window,

step through and have her in his arms before she realized what he was doing.

Reaching down he picked up a big, heavy rock

18

THE bright morning sunshine streamed into the room and Ralph pulled the covers over his head. Sunday morning. *His* Sunday morning off. So he could sleep. He and Mr. Pilcher took turns being in charge of Pearl on Sundays.

Well, he thought, stretching luxuriously, he'd earned another medal for noble conduct. He hadn't broken any windows. And thank Suzie May for that. Because as he'd gone around the house, the rock in his hand, he'd heard a soft little whistle. It was Suzie May leaning out of her upstairs room.

"Hey!" she whispered.

"Hey, yourself!" he whispered back. Trust Suzie May to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"I've been worrying."

"What about?"

"Your windpipe. How is it?"

"Okay, I guess."

"I just don't know my own strength."

"No, Suzie May, you don't."

"I'll have to be careful and not hold a man around the neck."

"That's right."

"It's easy to break ribs, too, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is. And, Suzie May, here's some advice from Papa Bayless. Let the man do the hugging, at least at first. You play hard to get."

"That will be hard to do. I *like* men."

"Okay, like them. But keep it under control. And we mustn't talk any more. We'll wake somebody."

She was reluctant to let him go. "I'm glad your throat's all right. It would be awfully bad for an actor to get anything the matter with his throat."

"Yes, it would. Good night, Suzie May."

"Good night, Ralph." She made a soft, kissing sound, then giggled and said, "There I go again, making advances. Good night, Ralph." She vanished from the window.

What a ridiculous conversation! Ralph hoped no one had been awake, overhearing it. And he was now completely out of the mood for window smashing. And so he dropped the rock and went inside to bed.

It was ten o'clock when he opened his eyes again and he was hungry. He got up and dressed, and as he was shaving he found that his throat still hurt and there was a large bruise across his Adam's apple. He'd show it to Leila; that ought to convince her.

He had heard no sounds from the other side of the duplex. Leila no doubt was down at Low Pearl having breakfast. But to his surprise he found her at her desk in the club-room, a big pile of ledgers around her, deep in her accounts.

"Why . . . hello!"

"Hello," she said without looking up.

She wore no make-up and her face looked drawn and pale.

"Had breakfast?"

"Yes."

"Are you feeling well? Not sick?"

"*Perfectly* well."

"I can't get used to you without make-up."

"I see no point in putting on make-up for these account books."

"May I remind you, there is a gentleman present? Or you might even wear it for your own sake."

She went on, looking down, still adding up figures, "I realize I was very . . . yielding. But when you said you weren't with Suzie May . . ."

He broke in, "I didn't say I wasn't with her. You assumed it."

"She's very pretty. I suppose you have a right to kiss her."

He pointed to the pencil marks she had just made. "Seven and eight do *not* make thirteen. Yes, I can read upside down. And now I want to show you something." He started to unbutton his shirt and then changed his mind. No, not on an empty stomach, not among the ledgers.

"Leila," he said, "I'm going down to Low Pearl and have my breakfast. A big breakfast. Then I'm coming back and we'll go for a walk, a long walk, away from everybody, out into the great open spaces, and then I'll show you . . ." He grinned and took her chin in his hand. "... not my etchings, but my bruises."

As he went out the door he said over his shoulder, "And while I'm gone will you *please* put on some lip-tick. I'd like to see how your shade goes with my complexion."

At the snack bar Ralph found all of the Pilchers, Mindy, and also Fernando who had spent the night with his family. Everybody was eating heartily and they were in an uproar. Mindy was leaving!

"There's a time to stay and a time to scam," he told them between mouthfuls of ham and eggs. "I'm ~~scam~~ scamming. Last night was the pay-off. That Smith dame! She'll have me analysed, adopted, sent to Harvard, run

through the clinic. I'll be talking soprano permanent before she's through with me. No, sir! I'm getting the hell out."

Ralph piled his plate high and sat down beside him. "Now, Mindy, take it easy."

"Take it easy! Would you take it easy in my spot? How'd you like to be adopted? And what's in it for *me*? The free lunches are starting at school. So the kids don't have money no more. I'm tired of being a genius and having a lot of women chase me around and take my cigars away from me. I'm tired of books and lessons and getting algebra crammed down my throat. I've done my bit; I've been a child long enough. The road's built. Suppose the bus don't come here no more. They won't go tearing up the road, will they? If the Mirandas got to go to school, let 'em move back to Mrs. Beach's. • Can't they move back, Fernando?"

"Sure," said Fernando, "they can move back. But pretty soon now little Teresa is old enough to go to school."

"See," said Mindy, "you still got *eight* children. So it's O.K. if I go. But if I stay they're going to find out about me and the whole show'll blow up in our faces. Anyway this Pearl deal was kinda temporary, it can't go on for ever."

"No," said Mr. Pilcher thoughtfully, "it can't."

Mrs. Pilcher now left the stove and came over to him. "Why can't it?" she demanded. "•Why can't it go on for ever?"

Mr. Pilcher looked at her in astonishment. "You want it to go on?"

"Of course I do."

"There's no future in it, my dear."

"I say there's no future in our act."

"No future in our act! What are you saying?"

"Well, the girls are going to get married and . . ."

"Married! Who to? What do you mean? Why didn't you tell me?" He glanced wildly from Donaldine to Suzie May.

"Calm down, Father. I don't mean anybody in particular. I just mean they'll *get* married. Girls do get married, you know. And there'll you be, all naked by yourself."

"I object to that word 'naked'."

"Well, that's what you are."

"Now, my dear wife . . ."

"Don't 'dear wife' me. I like it here. I want to stay."

"So do I," said Donaldine.

"Me, too," said Suzie May.

Uncle Rollo cleared his throat. "In any situation," he told his brother, "I always consider Sally. I do believe this more settled life agrees with her and her babies. And so I cast my vote with your wife and daughters. I say: Me, too." He patted Sally on the head. "What do you say, my girl?"

"Me, too," barked Sally, and licked his hand.

"It does seem to be unanimous, Donald."

Mr. Pilcher looked from one to the other, hurt and bewildered by the united front against him.

His wife said, "Leila told me this morning they were going to work out some system, and we'd get regular salaries, and good salaries, too. By the way, Leila didn't look well," she said, turning to Ralph. "Is anything the matter?"

"She said she was okay," Ralph answered, pouring himself another cup of coffee. One last cup and he'd go back to the club-house and have it out with her.

Mr. Pilcher got to his feet. "I'm floored by this—completely floored. My family wanting to give up the

act. We can't be hasty about this. We'll have to think things out very carefully. Right now I'll go down and get the gates open." He left the hall but returned almost immediately, followed by Walt.

"Well," said Walt, looking very pleased, "we're in one hell of a mess!" He pointed at Uncle Rollo. "And it's all your fault."

"What've I done?" Uncle Rollo asked him.

"Gildin' the lily, that's what." He went over to the stove. "Guess I'll have another breakfast. Been quite a spell since my first one. Been enlargin' my pool, more room for panners. Got myself a real healthy appetite worked up."

They'd all learned to let Walt tell his stories in his own way so they waited patiently for him to bring his breakfast over to the table and give them the facts in his own good time.

"It was like this," he said at last. "I'm diggin' there, gettin' the pool a dern sight bigger, when I look across at where the cave is. And the doggonedest lot of people is comin' out of the cave, musta been a *dozen*, and they's carryin' picks and shovels. Never seen nobody goin' in, just comin' out. Well, these folks go around the side of the mountain and pretty soon I hear a couple of cars startin' up and goin' away. So I says to Emily, 'Emily, somethin' goin' on over there, and we'll just mosey over and see.' So we do. And we go in. Meanin' I go in. Emily waits outside. Emily don't like caves. I go in by myself and it's a mess, biggest damn mess I ever see! And 'all because of this gildin' the lily this Rollo feller's done."

"Now, come on, Walt," said Uncle Rollo, "tell it to us straight. What's this gildin' the lily got to do with me?"

"That story you told in the cave. You couldn't leave it the way I told it, about the robbers hidin' in the cave. You had to put in your two bits' worth, have the robbers hidin' not only themselves but the gold, too, and how that there gold was buried right there under folks' feet. So after that story some of them folks come back, and they've gone and dug the place to pieces. Biggest damn lot of holes you ever see. Deep ones, too. And the skeletons thrown every which way, all broke up.

"They musta been there all night. Burned nigh a hundred candles, you can tell by the stubs. And empty beer cans all over. The railin's pushed down the shaft, too, and part of the back wall dug into so it's all tumbled down. Sure's an unholy mess, all right."

"Well," said Ralph, "we'll have to clean it up. Everybody get a shovel."

Uncle Rollo said quickly, "I think maybe I'd better stay with Sally. I'll take Donald's place on the gates today."

"Of course, Rollo," his brother said sarcastically, "we couldn't count on you for any *physical* labour."

"Take Teenie," said Mrs. Pilcher, handing them the bird cage.

I 9

Walt was right. The place was an awful mess. The gold-seekers had dug widely and deeply in the floor of the cave and in the walls. The skeletons were no longer skeletons, just heaps of bones, mingled with beer cans, remains of sandwiches, half-eaten pickles, cigarette stubs. The railing was down at the bottom of the shaft. The little Madonna in the shrine had been torn from her niche and smashed.

Walt said he knew where there was some more old railing and he and Mr. Pilcher had gone to get it in the Chevvie. In the meantime, Ralph and Fernando and the ever-present Suzie May, who had insisted upon coming along, shovelled the dirt back in the holes. Teenie fluttered happily in his cage. A dozen or so candle stubs gave them light.

"I'm just wondering," said Ralph, "how we'll ever get those skeletons put together again."

"Maybe," Suzie May suggested, "it would be easier to get some new ones. We could dig up the ones in the graveyard."

Fernando was shocked. "That is a bad thing to do. Disturb the dead."

"Well," said Ralph, "according to Mrs. Beach, a lot of very bad men are buried there. So we might as well let their bones do some good."

Suzie May, who had been working close to the back wall, suddenly held her candle high above her head and cried, "Look! There's another room through here." Ralph and Fernando came over and with their candles at the hole looked inside.

"It is another room," Ralph said, "and I see more skeletons."

So then they did a foolish thing. They pulled away some earth and stones and enlarged the hole until it was big enough to pass through. They took Teenie with them and watched him for a minute. He fluttered about in his cage, perfectly happy. The air was okay.

It was a room similar to the other, but the roof was not so high. A half dozen skeletons lay about, surrounded by stone axes and the remains of baskets and what must have been leather moccasins.

"Well," Ralph said, "at least this solves one problem.

We don't have to dig up any skeletons out of the graveyard. We can move these or knock out that wall and have one big cave instead of two little ones."

"And," said Suzie May, "there mustn't be any more stories about robbers hiding gold."

"We'll eliminate the robber story entirely," Ralph agreed. "It just might give some more . . ." He never finished the sentence for suddenly there was a rumbling and a roaring and behind them a soft, sliding sound. They turned, and where the hole had been there was no hole at all. A part of the roof had come down. They were trapped!

Suzie May screamed, dropped her candle, and began tearing at the dirt and rocks with her bare hands.

"Stop!" Ralph cried. "You'll bring the whole place down!" Dropping his candle, too, he tried to pull her away. But she flung him aside with such force that he tripped and fell down, giving the back of his head an awful blow. He lay there half knocked out.

It was Fernando who knew what to do. Thrusting his candle into some soft earth, he took Suzie May by the arm, swung her around and with a right to the jaw knocked her out. She crumpled into his arms and he dragged her out of the way just as a big rock crashed down, missing her by inches.

He half lifted, half dragged her to the far corner. They huddled there as the rocks and debris came falling down. Finally it stopped. •

"I think we're okay here," Ralph said. "It looks pretty solid up above."

"Yes," Fernando said. "I think now we are safe." He put Suzie May's head on his knee and felt her jaw. "I did not break it."

"That's good. You gave her quite a crack."

"I had to do it," he said defensively. "She is very strong."

"You're telling me!" Ralph said, rubbing his head, which hurt excruciatingly from the fall she had caused him.

Fernando braced his back against the wall and took Suzie May more closely into his arms. By the light of the one candle she looked like a beautiful marble statue.

Fernando put his hand on her heart. "It is beating very strong. She is all right, I think." Then he bent down and kissed her.

"Don't mind me," Ralph said, feeling a little embarrassed.

"I do not mind," Fernando said. "I will kiss her awake."

It was the right treatment. Suzie May stirred and opened her eyes.

"Oh," she moaned, looking up into Fernando's yearning face, "somebody hit me."

"I did, my sweetheart. But better a little hit from me than a big hit from the rock."

As she looked around and awareness of the situation came to her, her eyes filled with horror. "What will we do? Will we die here like the Indians?"

"No, Suzie May," Ralph said, "we won't. Your father and Walt will be back and they'll dig us out. But we can't try to do it ourselves. We might bring the roof down."

"We are safe in this corner," Fernando told her.

Suzie May's eyes stared upward and she seemed reassured. Then they came back to Fernando and she smiled at him tenderly.

"Sweetheart," cried Fernando, and again his lips came down on hers. Suzie May's arms reached up around his neck. She was holding him tightly, but he didn't seem to mind.

Ralph got to his feet, feeling decidedly wobbly. He found the candle he'd dropped, but not Suzie May's. He said to Fernando, indicating the candle that was still burning, "Shouldn't I put that out? Save it in case we have to be here for some time?"

"No," ordered Fernando. "I want to see her beautiful face."

"Okay," Ralph said, and sat down again. The love-making went on. Well, if they weren't embarrassed, why should he be?

"I'm sorry to hit you, but you did not obey. Always the wife must obey the husband."

"But . . ." said Suzie May.

"We will be married. It is meant to be."

"Why, yes," said Suzie May, looking up at him in wonder, "why, yes, it is."

After another long kiss, Fernando looked up and said to Ralph, "You are the witness. You heard her say it. We are engaged."

"Congratulations."

More kisses, more embraces. The lovers didn't mind Ralph any more than they minded Teenie. "Teenie," Ralph said to the canary, "you're falling down on the job. You should be singing 'Hearts and Flowers'."

Surprisingly Teenie arched his throat and began to sing. Not very good singing, but considering he'd never let out a chirp before, it was a miracle.

The lovemaking continued and suddenly Ralph's arms ached for Leila. Fernando had the right system. Sock the girl and kiss her. No talk. Okay, he'd try it. As soon as he got out of this place he was going right to High Pearl and to Leila. He couldn't quite see himself hitting her on the jaw but he knew he was going to take her in his arms, and there wasn't going to be any chatter.

After what seemed like a very long time muffled sounds were heard on the other side of the wall. All three of them scrambled to their feet and began to yell.

Then it seemed an even longer time until Walt and Mr. Pilcher got a small opening made through the barrier of rocks and dirt.

"Are you all right?" Walt shouted through the hole.

"We're all okay," Ralph shouted back.

"Thank God," cried Mr. Pilcher.

"Now," Walt told them, "it's goin' to take a little time to get this hole bigger. We gotta get timber for bracin'. How's Teenie standin' up? If he's okay then you got plenty of air."

"Teenie's okay, he's *singing*," Ralph assured him.

"Well, don't worry, we'll get you out."

Then Suzie May was at the opening. "Daddy," she shouted, "isn't it wonderful? Fernando and I are engaged."

"Don't worry, darling," her father shouted back, "you're hysterical."

"I am *not* hysterical. We're going to be married."

"*Si, señor*," yelled Fernando, "I ask you now for the hand of your daughter."

"You'll be all right," soothed Mr. Pilcher; "we won't be long. Just keep calm."

"I'm perfectly calm," Suzie May insisted, and went back to Fernando's arms.

Ralph stretched out on the ground again. His head hurt horribly. Damn Suzie May! Damn other people's love-making! He wished he had Lila there with him right now.

The second wait was longer than the first, at least for Ralph. But at last there was a commotion in the outer cave and he knew by the sound of the voices that their rescuers were numerous.

When the hole into their prison was quite large and

braced strongly enough to satisfy Walt, Suzie May went through. Then Fernando. Then Ralph carrying Teenie.

Ralph had an almost frantic desire to see daylight again and pushed his way to the cave entrance where the bright sunshine struck him like a blow. He felt himself spinning and hastily sat down and thrust his head between his knees.

"You all right?" asked Walt.

"Sure," he said after a minute, "just a little dizzy, that's all. Got a bump on my head, in there."

"Well, take it easy, feller."

Ralph rubbed his eyes and looked around. Suzie May was in her mother's arms. Fernando was being enveloped by half a dozen Mirandas. Uncle Rollo was there and Mindy and several strangers too, looking pleased and excited to have been in on the rescue.

He blinked his eyes again. The sun was still too bright. It was hard to get the group into focus.

"But where's Leila?" he demanded.

Uncle Rollo looked at him oddly and laughed in an embarrassed sort of way.

"But where is she?" Ralph repeated.

Uncle Rollo hesitated. "She couldn't come. She was . . . busy."

"Busy at *what*?"

"She's a very strange girl," Uncle Rollo commiserated. "She said she was in the middle of a trial balance and she couldn't leave it. I don't understand her. I mean if Sally had been in any danger . . ."

A wave of anger and mortification swept over Ralph. So Leila had to balance! Her damn figures were more important to her than whether or not he was buried under a ton of rocks.

He got to his feet staggering slightly, and caught at Walt.

"Hey, you're still groggy."

"I'm okay."

"Well, Sam Carr sent you a message. You gotta get into Bigfield pronto. Seems he's got a mess there, too, and he said you was to come and not wait for nothin'. But maybe someone oughta go in and say you ain't comin' till you feel better."

"I can go all right. My head hurts, that's all. But I'll have to change these clothes. I'm all over dirt."

Leila hadn't been there! All the way up to High Pearl that thought clawed at him. Leila had been too busy getting her trial balance to be concerned whether he got out of that cave alive.

By the time he pulled open the door of the club-house he was in a red rage.

Leila was sitting at her desk. Even angry as he was one part of his brain noted that she had on make-up and looked very pretty, that there was about her something melting and expectant.

"Well, book-keeper," he flung at her, "I hope you balanced!"

Her eyes widened in surprise. "Why, yes, I did. But what's the matter with you? You're covered with dirt."

"I might have *stayed* covered for all you cared."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

He strode down the hall to his bedroom and began to peel out of his dirty clothes into clean ones. When he came back to the club-room she said, "I think you should explain why you're acting like this."

He glared at her. "The explanation is that you haven't a heart, you're just a human adding machine!"

He went out slamming the door.

He had driven nearly to Bigfield before his head stopped aching, and simultaneously it came to him that Leila

couldn't have known of his plight in the cave. Hadn't she asked him *why* he was covered with dirt? She couldn't have understood what Uncle Rollo had shouted to her. And the way she'd looked when he'd come in. Warm and eager, like a girl in love. And there he'd stood hurling insults at her. He must have been completely out of his head from that bump.

He slowed up and threw in the clutch. He'd turn around and go back and apologize. Let Sam Carr stew in whatever mess he was in. But then he saw he was at the city limits. Better see what Sam wanted, then he'd hurry back to Pearl and go down on his knees to Leila.

20

"PEARLY gates, here I come," Ralph sang at the top of his voice, sending a couple of jackrabbits loping off into the desert, their big ears black against the setting sun. "Right back where I started from," he warbled on, and it wasn't the Pilchers' old Chevvie he was driving, but a winged chariot with golden wheels. He was on his way back to Pearl and to Leila.

Bayless, Love-'em-and-leave-'em Bayless, Rollin' Stone Bayless, was going to get himself a girl and settle down. Leila Page, of all girls, and in Bigfield, of all places. Darling Leila! If she didn't say "Yes", he'd try the Fernando method. But first he'd have to do some apologizing.

Life! Ralph thought. It's a chain reaction. Me, being the boy scout, giving a strange girl a lift in my car, the strange girl sending me off on a detour, the detour leading to Pearl, to the job with Walt, the job with Mrs. Beach, the job of bringing a ghost town back to life, and now to the job

in Bigfield. One thing leads to another and you never know your luck. Like taking some lousy bit part and then the leading man breaks a leg and you jump in and save the show.

Egger didn't break his leg, but he'd blown his top and resigned. And who was offered his job? Who was the new Chamber of Commerce secretary. None other than Ralph Bayless.

At one point during the meeting Ralph had coughed tentatively and said, "I think I'd like to clear some things up. I'd like to lay my cards on the table and . . ."

Carr put a hand on his arm. "Your cards have been on the table for a long time. I'm president of the bank, you know."

And suddenly Ralph understood. Leila's and his cheques, the ones from Mrs. Beach that they'd deposited at the bank. Why of course Carr knew the score!

Carr said, "Speaking of cards, when a fellow has trumps and take tricks, that's nothing. But when a fellow starts with *nothing* in his hand and still makes the game, that *is* something. And that's the kind of a fellow we want to hire." He grinned at Ralph and continued, "We know who deserves credit for this whole Pearl deal."

Around the table there had been nods of agreement and a murmur of assent. There it was. They all knew the score. And they still wanted Ralph as their secretary. They wanted him and they wanted Leila, too. She was to be the secretary to the secretary, and have charge of the books. They were both to have good salaries, plus a percentage of Pearl's take.

As for Mrs. Beach, in gratitude for her help, something very nice was to be offered to her. She was to be made the honorary mayoress of Pearl. Ralph laughed out loud when he thought of it. How the old girl was going to eat that up! He

had a feeling, too, that Mrs. Beach would give up Beachcroft—make an orphanage out of the old monstrosity, or some other charitable thing—and move to Pearl.

The Pilchers, no doubt, would become permanent fixtures. Mrs. Pilcher and Uncle Rollo would see to that, no matter how much Papa Pilcher longed to be a living statue. Mindy would leave, of course, and the sooner the better. The situation had dynamite in it.

Walt? Walt was still protesting that as soon as he'd got a little bigger stake he and Emily were going back into the hills to work that claim of his. But Walt was just kidding himself. He was never going to leave this easy life and easy pickings.

He and Leila would move, but only to Bigfield. They would enjoy living in a modern house all by themselves instead of in Grand Central Station.

"Leila Page, here I come," he bellowed out loud, and several more jackrabbits began bounding over the mesa.

It was almost dark when he drove into Pearl. All the better, he thought. The moon would be coming up soon. Might as well have suitable props. Probably Leila was eating by now. He went into the theatre—it was already filling up with customers—but Leila wasn't there.

"Is she up at High Pearl?" he asked Mrs. Pilcher who was busy at the snack bar.

"She's gone," she told him, not looking up.

"Gone! Where?"

"To Bigfield," said Mr. Pilcher, who was doing something about the coffee pot and who also refused to look at him.

Something was wrong, Ralph sensed. "How'd she get to Bigfield?" he demanded. "And when's she coming back?"

Husband and wife exchanged glances. "She's gone for good," Mrs. Pilcher told him gently.

"Gone for good!" he repeated inanely.

"Did you two have a quarrel?" Mrs. Pilcher asked him.

"Not what you'd call a quarrel. I was off my rocker and said some things I didn't mean. Didn't she talk to you at all, give you any reason for leaving?"

"We were all awfully excited about Suzie May's engagement. I guess I didn't give her much chance to talk. She just came in with her bag and said it was time for her to go. She's going to take the midnight train to Los Angeles."

"But," Mr. Pilcher put in, "maybe she won't go to Los Angeles. Hubert Beach didn't want her to."

"But what's Hubert Beach to do with this?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Pilcher, looking confused, "I didn't talk to you. He was the one who took her to Bigfield. He came in his car and that's how she got to town. She . . ." There was more to tell, Ralph could see, but at this moment Walt came up and interrupted.

"Well, young feller, you goin' to let that Hubert beat your time? You goin' to let her go off with him?"

Ralph stared at the three of them in complete bewilderment. "I'm not still crazy, am I? Will somebody please tell me what this is all about?"

"Sure," said Walt, "that Hubert's movin' in on your lady friend. He says he's havin' her for his secretary. He says he's takin' her round the world with him."

"The hell he is!" Ralph exploded, and ran outside.

"Mr. Beach?" said the clerk at the hotel desk. "His suite is 307. I'll call and see . . ."

But Ralph was already taking the stairs three at a time. At the door of 207 he hunched up his shoulder

and crashed into it with tremendous impetus. The door was not locked, nor even completely shut. He fell tumbling into the room, almost falling flat on his face.

Leila and Hubert were sitting on the davenport, a sheaf of papers spread over the coffee table.

With great dignity, Hubert got to his feet. "And what, pray, is the meaning of this intrusion?"

Ignoring Hubert Ralph stood over Leila. "What a lousy, dirty trick to leave like that!"

"Do you think you deserve any consideration after what you said to me?"

"I'm sorry for what I said. I take it back. I apologize."

"Very well," said Leila coldly. "I accept your apology." She turned her face away and stared at the wall.

Hubert put his hand on Ralph's shoulder. "My dear fellow, you've made your apology, the lady has graciously accepted it, so why not be on your way? You *are* intruding."

"Oh, am I!" Ralph said belligerently, flinging the hand away.

"Yes, you are, you know. Miss Page and I are discussing the possibility of her coming to work for me. I feel she would have opportunities with the Beach Company she would not have in Los Angeles. She would also have opportunities to travel, to see the world, all the strange wonderful places." He was talking more to Leila than to Ralph. "As my personal secretary . . ."

"Leila already has a job," Ralph interrupted.

"Yes," said Hubert blandly, "with *my* mother."

"No longer with your mother." And now Ralph was talking to Leila, not to Hubert. "With the Bigfield Chamber of Commerce. As the secretary to the new secretary. And who is the new secretary?" Ralph slapped his chest. "Me!"

Leila stopped looking at the wall. "Why, Ralph, how wonderful!"

"Egger has resigned. I'm it. *You and I are it.*"

"They want me, too?"

"The two of us. It's a package deal. So you see you can't work for Whoozis, here. You have to work for me."

"Miss Page," cried Hubert, "don't you get the picture? It's an entirely selfish one. Without you as a book-keeper he *can't* get the job. Believe me, Miss Page, you have a much greater future with me than with the chamber of commerce of this one-horse town. Why should you sacrifice a career with the Beach Company to aid this man get a job? Also—although I grant this is not the moment to speak of it—I have reason to believe that our business relationship might burgeon into something warmer and . . ."

"Wait a minute, brother," Ralph broke in, "are you proposing to the lady?"

"I am not proposing at the present moment," Hubert stated. "Miss Page and I do not know each other very well, but I would say tentatively . . ."

"Oh," jibed Ralph, "you're one of those *tentative* boys! Well, I'm *not*! When I propose to a woman I make a firm offer, and I intend to propose right now!" He grasped Hubert by the collar and the seat of the pants. "So if you don't mind . . ."

Before Hubert quite knew what was happening to him he was forcibly marched to the door and as forcibly thrust outside. Then Ralph turned the bolt.

"Now!" he said, striding over to Leila. He bent and swung her up into his arms. Then he sat down on the davenport himself and kissed her for a long, long time.

"There!" he told her at last. "Are you satisfied it's not your bookkeeping I'm interested in?"

"Well . . ." she began, looking radiant, but bewildered.

"Oh, so you're not sure! Let me prove it to you."

Just then a key was thrust into the lock from outside, the door opened, and a fat, blond man strode in.

"Here now," he ordered, "we can't have none of this!"

"Who the hell are *you*?" Ralph demanded.

"I'm the house detective and this hotel is against the two sexes being together in a *locked* room. For *that* you gotta be married."

"Very astute of the management," Ralph told him. He put Leila on her feet and stood up himself. "Leila, you heard what the man said. We've got to get married."

Leila turned on him her enchanting smile. "Then, darling, let's *get* married."

"Buster," Ralph addressed the detective, "has this hotel a bridal suite?"

"Sure has."

"Well, reserve it for us, will you? We'll be needing it."